

Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression or Co-option towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church?

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Abstract

Secularism in Ethiopia has not been practiced as stipulated in the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE): separation of state and religion. Instead, consecutive regimes, since the introduction of secularism, have employed a tactic of co-option and repression towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) to meet their political objectives. This research article addresses the nature and manifestation of government intervention in the EOTC through either co-option and/or repression, with a special emphasis on the post-2018 regime. The study argues de-facto secularism in Ethiopia is far from the essence of separation of state and religion; it is a new version of religion industriously implemented by governments to upgrade the Orthodox Church in a way that fits with the political system. The secular regimes co-opted and repressed the church conditionally at any cost to the institution through a Machiavellian approach. The study also finds that the prosperity-led regime was actively involved in the internal affairs of the church in the early days through co-option in the name of reconciliation with the exile synod. In the later days, via repression, massive killings of orthodox followers, burning of churches, and restrictions on the church's annual ceremony, as in the case of Epiphany and Meskel (Demera), the regime oppressed the church.

Keywords: Secularism, politics, religion, co-option, repression, EOTC

1. Introduction

Ethiopia has practiced a de jure secular political system for almost half a century. Following the disposal of the age-old monarchical system in 1974, secularism became one of the guiding political principles of the republic. As was common anywhere in the then Christian states, the state and the church in Ethiopia were tightly intertwined, with one buttressing the other in both spiritual and civil administrations for millennia. The ancient monarchs claimed divine justification for their wars and empires and demonstrated religious devotion as a key ingredient of legitimacy for the state (Jorgen, 2009). The blurred or theocratic nature of the interaction between the state and religion in pre-1974 Ethiopia is not an exception.

Among the immediate reactions of the Military Regime (1974–91), the adoption of secularism, constitutionally introducing a separation between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the state, is worth mentioning. The Derg regime, which adopted socialism as its peculiar ideology, had, of course, an anti-religious approach that considerably affected all religions. The regime particularly reacted to EOTC oddly; politically, the regime persecuted the highest officials (including the murder of his holiness Patriarch Theophilos) of the church, nationalised its properties, and condemned the church as old age wished to be collapsed (Tsegaye, 2020). Notwithstanding the adoption of secularism and hostile reactions to the church, religion continued as a solid political apparatus in socialist Ethiopia, and the regime engaged in manipulation of the institution for political ends.

The coalition of identity-based liberation movements overthrew the 17-year-old regime, full of civil war and uncertainty, in 1991. The coalition of the liberation fronts called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF) confirmed the de jure secular political landscape in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic (FDRE) constitution. Article 11 of the FDRE constitution clearly stipulates "the separation of state and religion," secularism otherwise. Additional provisions on religious equality and freedom are also inculcated. Although the constitution prohibits state intervention in religious affairs and vice versa, the regime tightly regulates every activity of religious institutions, in this case the EOTC. The two regimes did subscribe not only to the Habermasian secularist idea of the public area of rational thought but also to the idea that religions were considered irrelevant and unfitting with their communist ideology (Ostebo, 2023). This is shocking progress for societies like Ethiopia with strong obedience to religious dogmas. With an intention to secure their political power, the EPRDF made an unreserved effort to regulate and subordinate different religious institutions (Haustein and Steb, 2011), which is in clear contradiction to the provision stated in Article 11 of the FDRE constitution. The regime clearly showed strong involvement in the appointment of the patriarch. Most evident is the

replacement of the patriarch in 1991 (ibid.), which was driven by a conflation of government and church politics.

The post-2018 political transition under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed gives room to religious discourse in Ethiopian politics. Unlike the previous regime, the premier uses religious languages of hope, loyalty, and love to induce his vision of a new Ethiopia (Haustein and Dereje, 2022). He was also actively involved in the religious affairs of the Orthodox, the Muslims, and evangelicals; he also played roles in the reconciliation process between the principal synod and the dissident one. In contrast, the Prosperity Party (PP)-led government condemned it for supporting schism in EOTC, mass killing of Christians, demolition of churches in Oromia Regional State, and other parts of Ethiopia. Notwithstanding the constitutional provision to protect religious institutions from the coercive powers of the state, the Abiy Ahmed regime in one or another way intervenes in EOTC through repression and to some extent, via co-option for political ends. Thus, the very objective of this study is to scrutinise the nature and manifestation of government intervention in EOTC through cooption, and/or repression, in contrast to Article 11 of the FDRE constitution, which has special coverage of the post-2018 regime.

2. Research methods and materials

Ethiopia installed a de jure secular political landscape in 1974. However, in Ethiopia where religions have significant weight, practicing assertive secularism¹, as mentioned in the 1995 FDRE, is tough business and impractical. As a result, the past three consecutive regimes (the military regime, the EPRDF, and the PP) have been strongly involved and interfered in varying degrees in religious institutions to achieve their political ends or garner legitimacy. This paper intends to examine the nature and extent of state intervention in EOTC. To address the issue under study, both primary and secondary sources were well consulted. As it is a live issue, consecutive press releases from EOTC on the schism, the killing of orthodox followers, and the burning of churches were reviewed. Press conferences held by the government, opposition political parties, and human rights commissions regarding EOTC's splits and religious conflicts were also analyzed. Domestic and international media outlets, too, were considered. The consecutive annual reports of International Religious Freedom (IRF) (2018-2022) are critically reviewed. Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles on secularism, journals studied by religious institutes, and other relevant data, were taken into account.

¹ Assertive secularism is a "comprehensive doctrine" that aims to eliminate religion from the public sphere (Kuru, 2007).

Thematically, the research article tried to scrutinize state manipulation and repression of religious institutions, with a special focus on EOTC, either through co-option, repression, or both since the onset of secularism, with a wide coverage of the post-2018 regime. The Machiavellian approach towards religion is employed to examine the nature of Abiy Ahmed's regime intervention towards the EOTC.

3. Glance at the Secularization Thesis: Tri-dimensional Understandings

In analyzing the politics of secularism in the EOTC, it is sound to identify the practical interpretation of secularism in line with the issue under study. Accordingly, three conceptual underpinnings are discussed here.

The Wane of Religion in Society:

This thesis perceives secularism as a lifestyle that is at odds with a supernatural power, God or Allah. It is an assumption whereby society as a group is committed to a just world order and a moral program of individual action that would address human problems without the use of supernatural explanation (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). Secularization in this understanding therefore implies the decline of religion; that is, religions previously accepted symbols, doctrines, and institutions lose their prestige and influence. Speaking otherwise, mystery or religious thoughts are something to be conquered by human reason, ingenuity, and the products of technology.

The wane of religion is believed to happen due to modernization, technology, and the increment of rational thinking. In the words of Roberts (2004:306), secularization is "the transformation of a given community with high institutional transformation and institutional freedom from religious influence and making more rational, empirical decisions by individuals and groups." It is making religion the lowest common denominator and thus establishing a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether. Weber (1994) also claims trust in divine power has lost trust in providing secured solutions to social and economic problems, and in contrast to a heavenly bank account, earthly and tangible economic actions have come to play an increasing role in measuring the worth of knowledge.

Secularism: the New Religion

The second contending conception of secularism is about a new religion capable of providing rational answers to the psych-social and politico-economic questions of modern societies. Accordingly, secularism is a replacement for old religion; it is in itself a belief with its own discourse. Proponents of this thesis insist that religions are declining as societal transformation increases; secularism is not a simple political philosophy, but

it intends to replace the age-old religion by promoting rational thinking and the freedom of individuals (Shafi, 2023). Thus, the freedom of individuals is at the heart of secularism as a new religion. It considers human beings as holy, and fulfilling human needs is prominent; in contrast to so-called traditional religions, homosexuality, and LGBT are considered individual freedoms to be protected.

Secularism is a manifestation of the "new religion" of reason that emerged in the Enlightenment period, which, at least in its early forms, identified rationality with Divinity and was found in the pursuit of knowledge, a spiritual quest (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). It is a kind of belief that best fits with the current rapid modernization. The rise of a new spirituality, secularism, today suggests that the institutionalised alternatives are the heirs of the Church of Reason. The old sacred vistas fail to answer the contemporary human psyche. Thus, the new paradigm or new sacred vista (secularism) is championed in a way that is relatively consistent with the sociocultural conditions imposed by high technology and multinational capitalism (ibid.). Thus, secularism is the new denomination of religion preferred in this century and beyond. The establishment of this new religion is not eliminating religion, yet secularised religion will be the leading religion of the 21st century and beyond (Shafi, 2023). This is due to the modern rational scientific age of enlightenment, which would replace religion as the basis for understanding and running the world. Governments that wish to renew religious canons in a way that fits with their political ends are more likely to have employed Turner's upgrading principle. Upgrading is reforming or secularizing religion in a way that fits with the contemporary assumption of democracy (Turner, 2007). Shortly, it is the secularisation of religions so as to make them fit into the current development.

Separation of State and Religion:

The separation of state and religion is the most pronounced and conventional conception of secularism in the mouth of the so-called secular government. However, secularism, as a principle that tries to restrict the public function of religion, is not a single magic formula applicable all over the world for all religions and states. It is understood as having no government support for religion and no government interference in the religious practices of both the majority and minority religions in a state (Fox, 2006).

Concerning the very objectives of secularism as a separation of state and religion, Mohammed Dejen (2018) noted as follows:

Secularism was introduced to achieve the following major purposes: firstly, to protect the state from excessive religious influence, which is freedom for the state; secondly, to protect religion from the coercive

powers of the state, which is freedom for religion; or lastly, to manage religious diversity.”

So, the separation of state and religion, as a concept of secularism, is about no state religion and no religious state being accepted. In the same vein, Article 11 of the FDRE constitution clearly confirms that “religion and state are separate, and there shall be no state religion; the state shall not interfere in internal religious matters, and religion shall not interfere in state affairs².”

4. Machiavellian’s Approach Towards EOTC

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), an Italian Renaissance political philosopher, statesman, and secretary of the Florentine Republic, weighed religions in their extrinsic values. He views religion as a useful instrument in the hands of the prince to technically exploit it for the ends of the state and for the sake of peace and security. In his masterpiece work, the Prince, Machiavelli, insists that religion should be exploited for the sake of political expediency; otherwise, religion and politics should be kept separate, with religion always being subordinated to politics (Zorn, 2009). In the same spirit, the consecutive regimes of Ethiopia since the introduction of secularism have harnessed the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as an instrument and recourse for their political objectives.

The Military Regime (1974 -91): Execution of the Patriarch

The Ethiopian monarchs, for millennia, gave the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church a significant position in the politics of the state. The coming to power of the military regime, however, brought radical political transformation. The adoption of secularism was among the primary reforms taken by the military junta, which officially announced the separation of the state from the Orthodox Church. Though the regime is atheist and secular, it employed a bi-dimensional policy of co-option and heavy-handed repression in order to spread its ideology and control rural localities (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015).

The Marxist regime, under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, caused both epistemic and physical damage to the EOTC. In the name of orchestrated corruption and committing acts of injustice with counter-revolutionary elements, the Derg regime deposed and later executed Abuna Tewoflos in August 1979 along with other top imperial officials (Haile, 1986), leaving a bloody footprint in the history of the church. The new patriarch (Abuna Takla Haymanot, elected in 1976), an appointee of the ad hoc committee, is undoubtedly apolitical with rigorous ascetic practice and selfless

² The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution, Article 11

philanthropism and an ideal choice for those in power, for he is a man in but not of this world (Ancel, 2011). Besides the appointment of a new patriarch at the expense of the church canon, the regime forced the retirement of the so-called old-regime member bishops. The bishops appointed during the time of Haile Selassie were not seen as the best leaders to manage the reform of the church; thus, out of fourteen bishops in 1978, only three could keep their positions (*ibid.*).

The expropriation of church land, the main economic base of the institution, in 1975 was also against the very institutional existence of the church. Some of the scripture of the Orthodox Church was collected and burned by the regime's direct order, perceiving the books as being used to exploit and oppress other Ethiopian people during the past feudal regime (Solomon, 2021). The regime also ordered the press and media to frequently repeat that EOTC and its system hindered the freedom of the Ethiopian people (Doulos, 1986). However, the role of the church in the victory of Adowa and other independence wars is by no means underestimated. The regime committed unlimited and shameful damage to the church and its followers. Implicitly, the big and famous Orthodox churches (cathedrals) were made into an exhibition hall as a historical emblem for the oppressed people by the regime by September 1982 (*ibid.*).

The new patriarchate then began consecutive training in all dioceses to order the priest and the follower to indoctrinate the compatibility between the Holy Bible and the ideology of socialism (Haile, 1986). The skillful exploitation of the holy patriarch to make him an instrument of the anti-orthodox movement and to scout by the carefully selected persists and other workers to induce the illusion of compatibility between Christianity and communism was practiced against the interest of the Church. Through systematic co-option, the church was highly manipulated for political and ideological indoctrination in favor of the military junta. Politically, the church excommunicated the insurgent groups and subverted the allegiances of rebels' followers, and ideologically, the church laid the foundation for the acceptance of the regime and to keep the status quo (*ibid.*). Through the deployment of heavy-handed repression, the military dictatorship posed indelible interference in church services. Speaking in other ways, the government seems to have taken a two-pronged approach toward the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, appropriating and attacking the church at the same time (Haustein, 2009). In its reign, the regime industriously worked to curtail the EOC's influence through policies of religious freedom and the secularisation of education, while attacking the Orthodox Church and leadership as reactionary aides to the old feudal order. The bad experience is that the church's reaction to this epistemic and physical damage was fragile, as the Marxist regime structurally oppressed it and systematically co-opted the church officials.

The EPRDF Regime (1991-2018): Dissident Synod Created

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the mastermind and founder of EPRDF, used the Orthodox Church and parish priests to win the war against the military regime and later to induce its Marxist-Leninist political ideology. A renowned founding member of the TPLF and an author, Aregawi Berehe (2008:302), insists that:

“Seminars for priests were conducted by an eloquent TPLF fighter, GebreKidān Desta, to replace the Ethiopian Church's authority by a TPLF-minded church. A scout under the leadership of Sibhat Nega infiltrates the age-old monasteries in Tigray, like Debre Damo, by planting TPLF member cadre monks to control the activity of the church in favour of the party. A separate secretariat of the Orthodox Church was formed in the liberated areas of Tigray, and thus, in practice, the Ethiopian Church was divided into two separate secretariats, one under the regime and the other under the TPLF.”

Following the collapse of the Derg regime in 1991, the TPLF-led regime deposed the then-patriarch Marqorewos in 1992 and forced him to live in exile. However, it was not proved until Wikileaks³ revealed the direct involvement of the regime in dethroning the patriarch. Tamerat Layne (ex-Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 1991-95) confessed to Donald Yamamoto, who served as U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia (2006-2009), that he regretted the action he took towards EOTC because he signed the order to remove and replace the original patriarch and the split of the church (Wikileaks, 2012).

The new patriarch of the new regime, Abuna Paulos, was enthroned on July 12, 1992. The exile synod also insists that the election of Paulos, who is a Tigre like most high-ranking government officials, was an orchestrated coup by the EPRDF (Haustein and stebø, 2011). Of course, it was meaningful in several interpretations. His Tigrean origin was an unambiguous indication that authority had shifted to a new ruling elite, and his election was also presented as the reinstatement of the righteous succession to Abuna Tewoflos (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015). The cadre in the new regime wanted a church leader at the top who shared their political vision, and thus Father Paulos seemed to fit with the system (Walle, 2013). For the first time, the Holy Synod of the EOTC is clearly divided into two parts through the direct action of the regime: the home synod under the authority of Patriarch Paulos and the dissident synod in the United States under the authority of Marqorewos.

The TPLF-led regime exploited the Orthodox Church from cave to palace for political ends. Its interference in religious institutions was guided by the divide-and-rule strategy of the colonial era (Østebø, 2023). The ruling

³ An international, online organisation launched in 2006 that publishes private, secret, and classified information from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers.

cadres have been monitoring religious spaces carefully and have multiple times interfered with internal religious matters (Haustein and Steb, 2011), in contradiction to Article 11 of their constitution. The political landscape of the regime posed diverse challenges to the Church: the separation of the Eritrean Church, the schism of the diaspora community, and the competition with other Christian denominations in a newly opened religious “market” (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015) are worth mentioning.

5. Co-option and Repression Towards EOTC: Under the Abiy Ahmed Premiership

Schism within the EPRDF, coupled with popular pressure, resulted in two significant political events in 2018: the resignation of ex-prime minister Haile Mariyam Desalegn, followed by the elimination of the TPLF from the political power center. The dominant party, EPRDF, was demolished, and the new one, Prosperity, under the premiership of Abiy Ahmed, was installed.

The Prosperity-led regime has practically employed both tactics of co-option and repression towards EOTC to secure its political power. Co-optation is using religion to support the already-installed system, while repression is an act of subduing, intimidating, and outlawing religious associations, groups, or figures that are considered to be a threat to state power (Serawit, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed’s Co-option in the Sandals of Machiavelli

Since his appointment, Abiy Ahmed, the prime minister, has used semi-religious vocabulary in his public speeches. He was also actively involved in internal religious affairs; he took part in the reconciliation of the EOTC with the exile synod and also in the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. He has thus tried to co-opt religious institutions by including religious thought in public speeches. That is why he wraps up his public addresses with the phrase “God bless Ethiopia and its entire people.” In his early days, the prime minister played a prominent role in the reconciliation of the exile synod with the principal one, and in his effort, the church praised him in advance. Besides, he frequently underscores the importance of the Orthodox Church for Ethiopia.

In his speech at the reconciliation conference of the church, he noted that “We cannot think of Ethiopia without the Orthodox Church; the Orthodox

Church is in itself a country⁴.” Similarly, in the forum of the Prosperity Party, he affirmed that “orthodoxy is a country, a heritage, and shall be protected⁵.” Abiy’s active presence in the EOTC and other religious institutions in general, however, is claimed as an instrumentalist co-option to utilize the church for his political ends in the spirit of Niccolo Machiavelli. An Italian political philosopher, Machiavelli, insists that religion shall not be ignored; the church and religion serve as an instrument for creating national customs and habits for creating national thought to preserve peace and order (Mansfield, 1985). Thus, he magnifies the extrinsic values of religion for political ends. In the same parlance, Abiy Ahmed (2021), in his book entitled “Medemer⁶ Journey,” argues that:

“Controlling religion is controlling the people; the people of Ethiopia are tightly loyal to their religion. Both Islam and Christianity are strictly adhering to their religious dogmas. Thus, controlling these religions creates fertile ground to control the public; this in turn helps to regulate the political landscape, legal institutions, and other social values.”

Accordingly, the post-2018 cadres following the footprint of the prime minister inculcate religious languages in public spaces against the principle of assertive secularism stated under Article 11 of the living FDRE constitution. The premier shows intent to systematically co-opt with religions, which is why his religious remarks are sometimes confusing, and he tends to adjust his language according to his audiences (Østebø, 2023) mainly to garner the most political support from the religious groups, and which was successful.

Does the prosperity regime suppress EOTC?

Notwithstanding the nature and type of government interventions in religious affairs, the post-2018 regime gives space to religion and its rhetoric in its political discourse. Beyond co-option, the prosperity regime also devised different tactics to limit religious institutions in general and EOTC in particular in the public space. In what follows, the researcher critically examines whether the church is oppressed or not.

⁴ Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s Speech at the Reconciliation Conference of the Orthodox Church.” YouTube, July 26, 2018. <https://youtu.be/83yinHVMyuA?si=pcdPUa7p7arf4D19> (accessed on December 24, 2023).

⁵ Dr. Abiy Ahmed Speech at the prosperity party conference, broadcast on EBC, March 13, 2022. <https://youtu.be/RSJb3WkcEKg?si=whfm4WQsTTPenhCV> (accessed on December 24, 2023)

⁶ Amharic word equivalent with Synergy

Schism in the EOTC: Government Response

Though the schism in the church has a backstory or precedent⁷, the ordination of the 26 new bishops without the knowledge of the Holy Synod on January 22, 2023, in the Oromia region by the three Orthodox Archbishops was blowing news to the church and the faithful at large. The leader of the so-called “Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities” defended that “the schism was as a result of Oromo’s unfair representation in the position of the EOTC synod and failure to use Oromo language in the church services⁸.” However, as Desta Heliso commented on Addis Standard (2023), the issue behind the split led by the bishops is highly motivated by political motives, not religious ones, manifested by ethnocentric goals. Although the principal synod excommunicated the three bishops and the newly ordained 25 episcopates, the new synod appointed its bishops in different dioceses by militant takeovers of these churches.

The reaction of the Prosperity-led regime during and after the schism in the Orthodox Church, however, is claimed by the church and other actors as repression against the legal personality and very existence of the church. The government forces, specifically the Oromia special force, and police, were involved in the takeover of the churches at the expense of the age-old Orthodox Church (Addis Standard, 2022). The Human Rights Commission of Ethiopia has also confirmed the excessive use of force by the government security forces during such clashes in Shashemene, the capital of West Arsi Zone⁹.

The Holy Synod, in reacting to the government action, insists that “the reality on the ground is that the casualties or schism were committed through the direct support of the regional government; this shows the government’s interference in the internal affairs of the church against the constitution, which is a coup d’état on the synod¹⁰.” In principle, the government is responsible for protecting the church and its faithful as a legal person from illegal ones. However, in practice, the special force, under the auspices of the regional government led by Shimelis Abedesssa, was directly involved in the breakaway of the church gates and the killings of and faithful in the daylight. Opposition political parties also exposed the unnecessary government intervention in the church’s internal affairs at the expense of the principal Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (shortly called E-

⁷ A head of the formation of The Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities, there was a movement and progress to establish the so-called *Oromia bet-kihinet* that laid foundation for the schism

⁸ Briefing paper by the peace research facility and Rift Valley institute on March 2023 entitled Religion, Politics and the State in Ethiopia.

⁹ Press release of EHRC cited from Addis Standard on 4th March 2023

¹⁰ Press Release of the Holy Synod on the schism

ZEMA) in a press release related to the schism condemned the government: “We are concerned with the measures taken by the security forces in contradiction to Article 11 of the constitution¹¹.” The party also noted that “recently, we have observed the intervention of the government in the internal affairs of the church in different aspects, potentially resulting in bad consequences.” Thus, the incumbent regime does not abide by the principle of secularism stated under Article 11 of the Constitution.

Beyond a simple intervention, there are groups accusing the government of having the intent to oppress and eliminate the ancient Orthodox Church from the politico, economic, and social arenas of the republic. “Through infiltrating ethnic entrepreneurs in the church, the government is working indirectly and industriously to dismantle the very institutional existence of the Orthodox Church¹².” In similar ways, the Amhara-affiliated association called the Amhara Association of America (AAA) insists that the attack under the leadership of the government up on the church is part of Abiy’s regime plan to demolish an icon and marker of Ethiopian unity¹³.” Such accusations, however, are not from scratch; the regime shows intent in different trainings to upgrade the religious thought of different religions in a way that fits with the political ideology of prosperity, synergy otherwise. René Lefort (2020) commented that the prosperity-led regime under the auspices of Abiy Ahmed, in contradiction to the principle of secularism, aims to “pentecostalism Ethiopian politics¹⁴” or indoctrinating prosperity gospel. The split in the Orthodox Church and officials’ presence at the back door of the schism is not solely limited to the so-called Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities, but in other regions too.

On May 7, 2021, another threat to the oldest institution happened. In Tigray, regional state bishops disclosed the establishment of a new patriarchate, so-called “the see of Selama Kesate Birehan. The justification, they insist, is the failure of the Holy Synod to defend the killing of the clergy and the destruction of churches and other religious heritages during the war between the central government and the TPLF (Addis Standard, 2023). On July 23 and 30, 2023, the new synod in Tigray appointed nine bishops, followed by excommunication by the principal synod.

The role of the TPLF in the formation of the patriarchate is not underestimated. The Holy Synod, in a press release, insists that “this illegal organisation has been planned for a long time; the Holy Synod recognised that

¹¹ E-ZEMA press conference on 31st January 2023

¹² Enat Party press release on 24 June 2023

¹³ Press release from AAA on 6 February 2023

¹⁴ A commentary by René Lefort on December 24, 2020 on Ethiopian Insight: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/24/mind-over-matter-abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/>

it was organised by individuals who were carrying out a deep-rooted hidden agenda with the help of political and government officials from time to time¹⁵.” Of course, TPLF’s manipulation within the church is a day-to-day reality. An "intelligence group" was formed to scout out the church's main monasteries and administrative structures that would help their mission's accomplishment (Aregawi, 2008). Thus, the see of Selam Kesate Berhan is an extension of the TPLF’s early-day manipulation of the church. That is why the regional television (Tigray TV) live broadcast¹⁶ the appointment of the bishops. This is therefore another sound testimony that the regime is marching against the very unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Besides the above-mentioned factions, there are also groups who appointed themselves as bishops in East Gojjam Diocese and Qoga Kidane Mihret Monastery. In an urgent meeting held on June 9, 2020, the Holy Synod deprived them of ecclesiastical power, thus restricting them from serving in the church. The Synod further established a nine-member committee to see the details of the issue. The split, however, remained unresolved. This faction called themselves the “Ancient Orthodox Church,” while others labeled them “Qibat believers,” and the split is interwoven with the age-old debate over the teachings of Christology.

	Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities	The see of Selam Kesate Berhan	Ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church ‘Qibat’
Precedent	The formation of the Oromia patriarchate within EOTC	TPLF’s manipulation of the church since its gorilla war	The entrance of Portuguese soldiers in support of the war against Ahmed Grange
Perceived Cause	Issues of language usage and ethnic proportion in the principal synod	Silence of the synod during the war in Tigray	The age-old debate over the discourse of Christology_ dogma
Government reactions	Involved in the takeover against EOTC	The regional government implicitly supports and broadcasts the appointment.	-
EOTC reaction	Excommunication	Excommunication	Excommunication
Location	Oromia Regional State	Tigray Regional State	Amhara Regional State

Table 1. Summary of the nature and government reaction to the schism in EOTC

¹⁵ A press release by the EOTC on August 2, 2023, accessed from the official Facebook page of THE EOTC media agency.

¹⁶ Broadcast on Tigray TV on August 3, 2023; retrieved on December 28, 2023. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/aE4AvTgs0NA?si=VDT2W8y7qZfWrzWx>

Casualties in the Church and the Faithful

In the consecutive years since the onset of the 2018 political reform, the killing of orthodox Amharans and the burning of orthodox churches have been clearly observed and confirmed by domestic and international organisations and authors in the area. “There was violence towards Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and believers in different areas of the country, which led to increasing concerns about Abiy’s inaction in protecting the faithful¹⁷.” Similar to this argument, Tsegaye (2020) also confirms that massacre, displacement, oppression, and harassment of Christians, the burning of churches and the prohibition of public Christian ceremonies are frequent adversities for Orthodox Christians in current Ethiopia.

Reports also revealed that in the quarters of EOTC, there is increasing discontent over the failure of the regime to give legal protection to Orthodox Amhara from recurrent damage and religious violence¹⁸. A U.S.-based international organization; International Religious Freedom (IRF), reports the status of religious freedom in every country annually. Accordingly, the report from 2018 up to 2022 shows a wide range of damage to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its followers, as summarised in the below table.

Year	Month and date	Region	Casualties
2018	August 4	Somali, Jigjig town	Six priests were killed, and eight churches were burned.
	August 9	Amhara, North Wollo (Woldia)	8 killed and 16 wounded
2019	July 18	SNNP, Sidama Zone	1 priest and 2 followers were killed and 3 churches were buried.
	October	Oromia	Eight follower were killed.
2020	September 6,7, and 13	Benshangul Gumuz	80 killed, 1 church buried, 600 members forced to flee, orthodox markers demolished
	August 26–September	Oromia	500* people were killed following the killing of singer Hachalu Hundessa.
	January 19/20	Dire Dawa	1 killed, 21 injured
	November 1	Oromia, Gawa Qana	54 killed, predominantly Christian
2021	November–April	Tigrai	78 priests were killed.
	March 5	Oromia	29 killed at Abo Church, East Wollega

¹⁷ A briefing paper by the peace research facility and Rift Vally Institute in March 2023 entitled Religion, Politics, and the State in Ethiopia

¹⁸ ibid

	November 28 and 29	Tigrai	800 civilians in the Marry of Zion festival
2022	January	Oromia	3 were killed at Woybela Mariyam Church, and 10 were injured.
	October	Oromia	1 deacon was killed and 11 worshippers were kidnapped.
2023**	December	Oromia, Arsi Zone	72 people killed in the burning of houses.
Total casualties			1641 killed, 12 churches burned, etc.

*The Oromia police force reports 239 killings, while the Barnabas Fund reports 500.

** sourced from the EOTC press statement on December 5, 2023.

Table 2. Summary of the annual reports of the IRF showing damage to the Ethiopia Orthodox Church (2018-2022)

The report of the IRF thus shows how much the church has been at risk since the coming of Abiy Ahmed’s regime. Leave alone the unreported damage (due to blockage of telecommunication, internet, and transport); taking the data from the IRF only, thousands of priests and followers are killed because they are orthodox followers, dozens of churches are burned; and thousands are displaced. The damages mentioned are committed by the security force or the failure of it to keep citizens from the illegal militant groups, especially the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)–Shane and Gumuz militants. In a press release, the Enat Party condemned the government: “in the local government structures of Oromia regional state, officials are directly and indirectly involved in the mass killing of the faithful, and the system is the orchestrator of the genocide, so we are not claiming justice from the criminals¹⁹.”

The Politicisation and Ethnicization of EOTC

The overthrow of the monarchy and the introduction of secularism in 1974 boldly diminished the influence of the church in the state. Beyond its role as a religion of the state, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was exposed to multiple attacks, perceiving it as a prominent part of the monarchy's power structure (Mohammed, 2018). The church is thus accused of double trends; it is perceived as an instrument of oppression of the age-old monarchy; and in other ways, ethno-nationalists since their inception propagate as if it is the religion of a single ethnic group, Amhara otherwise. Speaking otherwise TPLF/EPRDF elites covertly narrated just as the EOTC was serving as a tool used by the Amhara ethnic group to oppress other Ethiopian ethnic groups

¹⁹ Enat Party press release on November 20, 2023, on the killing of 35 orthodox believers on November 23 and 27 in Oromia region, East Arsi Zone, Sherka woreda.

(Solomon, 2021). Hammering the Amhara ethnic group and EOTC in the same name is evident, but wrongly installed by ethnocrats.

The church is misinterpreted and misrepresented mainly by Tigrian and Oromo ethnic-nationalists in different aspects, including its spiritual or doctrinal issues, evangelization activities, clergies and bishops, cultural legacies, and the relationship it had with the state (Tsegaye, 2020). However, in the reach of the researcher, the dogma and canon of the church are indiscriminate to race, ethnicity, sex, and the like. Indeed, it is true that most Amharas are early orthodox believers, but that does not mean that all Amharas are Christian orthodox. And it also does not mean that there are no other ethnic groups that are Orthodox Christians.

Extreme ethno-nationalists of Oromo defined Orthodox Christianity as a religion of the Abyssinians (the Amharas) and perceived the church as racist to the Oromo nations (Asafa, 2004). It is arguable that the politicisation of the church coupled with identity politics escalates attacks on the church, and its followers. Ethnic entrepreneurs understood the church's spiritual mission as an instrument of "colonisation" and "destruction of indigenous peoples. They also associate poverty with the church, arguing that "the cause of poverty in the Oromos is assumed to be related to the occupation of a large proportion of land and veneration of saints by the EOTC (Gebru, 1993). Ethnic nationalists therefore see the EOTC as the enemy of their ethnic group. "Oromo nationalists, for instance, built Oromo nationalism against these features: the Orthodox Christians, Amharic language, and Amhara culture" (Solomon, 2021).

The ethnicization and politicisation of the EOTC are not without violence; instead, they are causing both physical and epistemic destruction to the EOTC and its believers (ibid.). The casualties among the faithful, sometimes supported by governmental apparatus and Islamic political fundamentalists, frequently occurred in different parts of Oromia, Gedeo, Jigjiga, Sidama, and Benishagul Gumuz, particularly between 2017 and 2020²⁰. The politicisation, murdering, and oppression of Christians, the burning of churches, the confiscation of public Christian holiday places, and the like are increasing from time to time, partly because of the collaboration and negligence of local government authorities (Tsegaye, 2020). In a nutshell, either by the direct involvement of the government or failure to protect the church and its followers, the post-1974 system is oppressing EOTC against the principle of religious freedom.

²⁰ BCC Amharic news: <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/45080641> , accessed on January 2, 2024.

Enclavement of the Orthodox from Political Power

Another symptom of oppression is the systematic elimination of orthodox followers from high-ranking political positions, or what Turner calls enclavement. It is a physical exclusion of certain religious groups that are perceived as a threat to the incumbent regime. Enclavement is a technique to regulate a specific religious group that potentially includes a strategy of exclusion with an intention to limit certain religious groups (Turner, 2007) from socio-political and economic involvement.

In terms of religious demography, the EOTC takes the absolute lead. According to the estimate for 2016 by the U.S. government, 44 percent of the total population are followers of EOTC (IRF, 2022). That is if the Ethiopian population is 120 million, half a million or so are orthodox followers. The World Population Review (2023) also confirms that 44 percent of Ethiopia's population adheres to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. So, even though the political landscape does not allow religion-based power distribution, the de facto presence of religious proportion in political positions in a country where religion is highly valued is mandatory to create a sense of belongingness and cultural equality. The systematic elimination of certain religious groups in the name of secularism from key political positions is repression or the intent of enclavement. Keeping their personal privacy, the researcher undertook a snowballing survey on the respective religious affiliations of top government officials, focusing on the executive organs of the government: 24 ministers (including the prime minister and the two deputy prime ministers), the chief executive of the 13 regional states, and the mayor of the two special cities, Addis Ababa and Dre Dawa.

Position	Orthodox	Muslim	Evangelical	Others
Cabinets: 24 ministers	16.6%	45.8	37.5	-
Chief Executive of Regional State/ President/ including Dre Dawa and Addis Ababa, 15	13.3%	46.6	40%	-
Demographic ratio*	44%	31%	23%	2%

*International Religious Freedom Report, 2022

As shown above, in a country where 44 percent of the total population are orthodox Christian followers, the first three key political positions—the prime minister and the two deputy prime ministers—are non-orthodox. And only 16.6% of the cabinets are Orthodox, while 46.6% are Muslim and 37.5% are Protestants or Evangelicals. Such a takeover of key political positions, potentially at the expense of the orthodox followers, is not a simple political calculation, unless it is repression. In addition, of the 15 key positions of chief executive of a regional state (including Addis Ababa and Dre Dawa), only 13.3% of orthodox people lead the regional state, while 46.6% and 40% are

Muslim and evangelical, respectively. Such a political manoeuvre, the researcher argues, is not abruptly happening but with an intention to physically distance orthodox believers from key political decisions, who could potentially challenge government oppression against the orthodox discussed in the aforementioned sub-sections.

Concluding Remarks:

The introduction of secularism in Ethiopia (the assertive kind) was not properly done. This is evidently clear after we consider the huge societal values that religion imparts to the general society. Curtailing religion in the public sphere, where 98% of the population is its faithful adherent, is not only impractical but also deprives it of its significant contribution to socio-economic development and national security. As a result, the consecutive regimes failed to practice secularism as stated in their constitutions. Instead, they tightly regulated religious institutions through the deployment of co-option and oppression.

The military regime, in the name of secularism, committed physical and epistemic casualties on the ancient and huge Orthodox Church. The execution of the holy patriarch, Father Tewoflos, is unforgettable in the eyes of the church. The regime sometimes co-opted and, at other times, oppressed the church to indoctrinate socialism as a political ideology at any cost to the church. The TPLF-led EPRDF regime had also matched against the EOTC from cave to palace and exploited it through the systematically recruited cadre priests, cadre-bishops, and intelligence groups. Sadly, the regime replaced the patriarch and forced the principal one into exile, which is a bold canonical breach. Almost for three decades, TPLF had become the alpha-omega of the republic; the Orthodox Church from the Holy Synod up to the single diocese fell under the tight control of the cadres.

EOTC, under Abiy Ahmed's premiership, has not escaped from co-option and repression. In his early days, the prime minister co-opted the church and contributed to the reconciliation of the exile synod with the home synod. The church and its followers praised and warmly welcomed the prime minister. Yet, in the later days, the Orthodox Church and its followers have been facing an uncountable series of damages. The killings of the faithful, the burning of the churches, and displacement are becoming daily news. The schism of the Synod, followed by the takeover of the churches by the illegal synod-so called "synod of Oromia and nations nationalities by the direct support of the Oromia special police force, shakes the church and the state at large. Therefore, the study finds that the Prosperity Party co-opted and repressed the church against Article 11 of the FDRE constitution.

Lastly, the researcher strongly argues that the version of secularism practiced in Ethiopia is not about the separation of state and religion. Instead,

secularism is becoming the de facto religion of the system. The regimes, through co-option and repression, forced the Orthodox Church to upgrade its canon, holy day festivities, and other church ceremonies. This is intended to renew the age-old religion in a way that fits with the political philosophy of synergy (so-called Medemer) and the new technologies, which is in total contradiction to the foundation of the Orthodox Church discourse.

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