

# **“Ahbashism”, Government and Ethiopian Muslim Protests**

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For more than three months, Ethiopian Muslims have been protesting against the “Ahbashism Campaign” supposedly masterminded by the government and the Higher Council of Islamic Affairs in Ethiopia (called “Majlis” in short). The protests usually take place on Friday after the completion of “Salatul Jum’a” (Friday Prayer). Slogans like “We want our rights! Stop Ahbashism campaign! The people want the Majlis to step down! Allahu Akbar!!” have become formal mottos of the public.

The Muslims denounce the continued government interference in the religious affairs; they also highly demand an indoctrination of the mass with Ahbash ideology (called by the people “Ahbashism Campaign”) to come to an end; the right of the public to elect the leaders of the Muslim community is the third request.

The small protest started at “Aweliya Islamic Institute” has now spread beyond Addis Ababa and reached the towns of Dessie, Dire Dawa, Harar, Shashemene, Assela, Adama, Jimma, Gondar, Alaba, Baddessa, Assasa, Chagni etc. These protests are largely remained peaceful. But after the government security forces killed at least seven protestors in the town of Assasa on April 27/2012), tension highly grew in the country.

Although Ethiopian Muslims were shouting for their rights for about ten months, their case came to the global media only after the Assasa killings. Many of them are deficient in explain the true nature of the struggle. On the other hand, rather than responding to the people’s request in appropriate manner, the Ethiopian government undermine the protesters and categorize them as extremists who want to sow instability and riot in the country. Consequently, many people were made to lose a clear knowledge about the ongoing peaceful movement.

Accordingly, I, an Ethiopian Muslim who have a chance to follow up the case attentively, decide to write this article to share what I know about the current Ethiopian Muslims’ movement. The article covers a period between July 15/ 2011 and May 11/2012.

## **The “Ahbashism” and “Anti-Ahbashism” Campaigns**

According to the Muslim informants representing the majority, in July 2011, the Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (popularly called “Majlisul A’ila” or “Majlis” in short) has started a country wide program aimed at amalgamating the Muslim populace according to the beliefs and doctrines of the politico-religious faction called “Association of Islamic Charitable

Projects” but whom the public know as “Ahbash” (the “Abyssinians”, a term denoting Ethiopia where Sheikh Abdullah Al-Harari, the founder of the faction, was born). The program started by training the leaders of the “Majlis” committee of the districts and imams of the mosques and in the long run, according to the informants, it will encompass all Muslims of the country. They call this effort of the Majlis “the Ahbashism Campaign” and they say that it is fully supported by the government of Ethiopia. They also say that both parties (the Majlis and the government) claim that “The new campaign is undertaken to eradicate religious extremism from the country which a radical Islamist movement called ‘Wahhabiyya’ was sowing in every direction for more than a decade”.

According to the informants, the wide majority (over 85%) of the Ethiopian Muslims believe “the Ahbsashism campaign” to be unconstitutional and illegal blow aimed at suppressing their religious rights and that they are struggling to repel the campaign by their struggle which they call simply “Anti-Ahbashism campaign” since they see the beliefs of the Ahbash organization as a deviant and heretical one which can never fit the thoughts of the true beliefs of Sunni Islam.

### **Composition of Ethiopian Muslim Society**

Ethiopia is a country where Islam sets its foots during the life time of prophet Muhammad. In the early years of his prophethood, when his followers were prosecuted by the pagans of Mecca, the prophet advised some of his followers to seek refuge in Ethiopia where there was a just king who didn’t oppress anyone because of his faith. Accordingly, many of his early followers, including his daughter Ruqayya and her husband the caliph Uthman ibn Affan, came to seek asylum under that pious king (called “Armah” by Ethiopian writers and “ Al-Nagashi” by Muslim writers). Since then, together with Orthodox Christianity, Islam established itself as one of the two dominant religions of the country.

Most of the Muslims of Ethiopia adhere to the Shafi’i School of law, one of the four legal schools of Sunni Islam. The Hanbali School has also a wide acceptance and its adherents are growing from time to time. The Hanafi and Maliki Schools have some followers in the northern and western peripheral areas. Tension within the Muslim society is very negligible and all of the followers of the four schools strive to recruit followers in peaceful ways. Furthermore, Muslims of Ethiopia developed an exemplary tradition of peaceful co-existing with other faiths especially the Orthodox Christianity.

### **Who is Ahbash? Why Most of Ethiopian Muslims Oppose It?**

“Ahbash” was born in Beirut, Lebanon, when an Ethiopian scholar called Sheikh Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al-Harari Al-Habashi assumed a leadership of a charity organization called “*The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects*” in 1983 (the organization was founded in 1930 and remained purely a charity endowment until the sheikh’s ascendancy of power ). Once installed himself on the leadership, the sheikh turned the organization to a new faction proclaiming itself a

preacher of the true creed of “Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jama’ah” (Sunni Islam). The Ethiopian origin of the sheikh gave to his organization the popular nickname known as “Ahbash” (“the Abyssinians”) to whom members of the association have no objection. The members of the association say that they adhere to the “Shafi’i” school of law, one of the four canonically accepted legal schools of Sunni Islam.

According to Ahbash, the theology of Sunni Islam has been polluted by a continuous waves emanating from the Wahhabiyya sect which was agitated by old time clerics like Ibn Teymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim (14<sup>th</sup> century Syrian scholars), synthesized as separate school by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Saudi scholar called Muhammad Abdulwahhab, and highly propagated from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century by the state backed Saudi scholars and their adversaries throughout the world. Ahbash says “The adherents of Wahhabiyya blaspheme the Muslim majority of polytheism while the latter worship only one God. They denounce the veneration of the shrine of the Muslim saints as an act of polytheism while Islam doesn’t forbid it. They even shed the blood of the Muslims who argued with them on this issue. They negate the Muslim majority by formulating a new school other than the four schools of Sunni Islam. Through its extremism and incapability to co-exist with other faiths, the Wahhabiyya has given a very bad image to Islam and Muslims.”

Ahbash also teaches that its followers shouldn’t emphasize political activism on primary basis even though they have rights to do so, and they should largely focus on accumulating practical knowledge striving to be high competitors in commerce and industry. For Ahbash, whatever the motive would be there is no need to protest against the law of any country as long as the governments of these countries respect the basics of freedom of worship. This is very essential in the case of non-Islamic countries of the world. Even in Islamic countries, where Muslims are the majority, protesting is not allowed. The Ahbash justifies this statement by quoting the popular saying of the prophet which addresses the people to obey the regime even if the leader is a brutal and oppressive one. In contrast, Ahbash believes that the “Wahhabiyya” sect seeks to install a government based on “Sharia” law even in non-Muslim countries. For that, Ahbash believes that the “Wahhabi” sect is unfit to exist in today’s world because of its supposedly intolerant and extremist behavior.

However, the vast majority of Ethiopian Muslims see Ahbash as a deviant sect whose doctrinal settings don’t fit the true Sunni beliefs. They say that the faction’s claim of following the “Shafi’i” rite has been disproved by famous scholars of Shafi’i school. For this claim, they point to the “fatwa” (religious edict) given by famous Islamic institutions like “Al-Azhar University” (Egypt) which is the main propagator of Shafi’i school of law.

These Muslims also say that Ahbash’s defense of non-Islamic practices such as shrine veneration are not supported by Shafi’i school of law because Islam doesn’t teach the worship of worldly gods. Some of the bad practices prevalent among Muslims of Ethiopia (like shrine veneration, superstitions, use of magic etc...) came from backwardness and Muslim preachers must teach the people about their danger. The effort of Ahbash to defend these practices clearly

shows that the faction has no concern for the first and most important principle of Islam which is to worship only one God. And it is nobody else but the one who opposes these non-Islamic practices whom the Ahbash faction calls “Wahhabiyya”. On conclusion, the majority of the Muslims say “Ahabash clearly strives to demolish the true tenets of Islam which can be justified by its deviated stance on the worship of Allah”.

Another accusation raised by the Muslim majority is the issue of heresy. Most of the Muslims believe that Ahbash promotes confusing and highly heretical doctrines. The list of these heretical beliefs include ( among others): It is forbidden to ask Allah to forgive all Muslims and a Muslim must seek forgiveness only for himself; there is no “Zakat” (obligatory alms) on paper money; Muslim women can wear tights and woman’s wearing of “niqab” (face-veil) is out of Islam ; receiving bank interests is allowed as long as the owners of the bank are not Muslims; You can cheat or lie to non-Muslim and you can steal the property of non-Muslim since; You can curse and insult the companions of the prophet (s.a.w) who rebelled against Ali ibn Abu Talib, the fourth caliph of Sunni Islam etc...

The other most important accusation on Ahbash is directed on the organization’s practice of “Takfir” (an edict of apostasy on those who are believed to violate the orders of Islam). It is said that Ahbash categorized those who doesn’t adhere to its beliefs as “apostates” and members are told to excommunicate these “apostates”. The list of these “apostates” includes many of the leading Muslim scholars starting from the imams of the Grand Mosque of Mecca (Masjid Al-Haram). The majority of the Muslims believe that the purpose of these apostasy “fatawa” (Takfir) is to disrupt the unity and peace of the Muslim society.

The political passiveness advocated by Ahbash is also rejected by the mass. The majority of the Muslims believe that Islam doesn’t prohibit from participating in politics; it teaches rather everybody should use his knowledge and money to serve his country and people. On the other hand, the majority of Ethiopian Muslims believe that the issue of Islamic state has never been advocated by any section of the Muslim mass.

### **Who has Chosen “Ahbash” as an Ideology to Expand in Ethiopia? Why Do They Choose It?**

The majority of Muslims believe that the ideology Ahbash is favored by different parties for different reasons. In their eye, the first these parties to support a plan to spread the Ahbash ideology through the ongoing campaign were the leaders of “Majlis” who are terrified by the growth of “Wahhabi” sect. Some of my informants (who told me not to expose their identity) told me that they heard “Majlis” leaders saying “The Wahhabi sect posed a big threat on the shrines of Muslim saints and old standing Sufi practices such as the celebration of the birth day of Prophet Muhammad. We couldn’t protect ourselves from the expanding ‘Wahhabi’ sect. So we must combat it in collaboration of groups such as Ahbash who are experienced in attacking Wahhabism.”

The second party perceived as the instigator of the campaign includes a handful of western countries who were highly concerned about what they called “the growing Wahhabi influence in Ethiopia”. For the west, Ethiopian Muslim scholars say, the growth of “Wahhabism” is not a matter of faith; it is an issue of a threat to their national interest and security. The westerns believe that radicalist groups like Al-Qa’ida were influenced by “Wahhabi ideology”. Therefore, according to the belief of many Muslim scholars, the “Ahabashism campaign” whose aim was to counter the “Wahhabi growth” must have been supported by these westerns nations. However, the westerns do so usually through indirect methods. For example, sources say that some western countries were financing the rehabilitation projects of Muslim shrines whose existence became at risk due to the expansion of the so called “Wahhabi” sect.

Some analysts also argue that certain scholars regarded as experienced analysts of the geopolitics of the horn of Africa such as Hagai Elrich, the Professor Emeritus of history at the Hebrew University, were advocating the importance of favoring the Ahabash sect which would be beneficial for both Ethiopia and its western allies.

The third and most important party accused by Muslims of instigating “the Ahabashism” campaign is the government of Ethiopia. They say that the Ethiopian government decided to have a leading role in the campaign because of certain socially and geo-politically motivated scenarios. These include government’s interest to use the campaign as one method of “divide and rule” system, the political passiveness advocated by Ahabash, the pressure coming from the diplomatic nations which stressed that “Wahhabism” should be curtailed, and the continuous appealing of the leadership of the “Majlis” against the rival sect of “Wahhabiyya”.

For all of these parties, according to viewers, “Ahabash” is an ideal candidate thought as having the ability to set back the expansion of the “Wahhabiyya” sect.

However, the majority of the Muslims believe that all of the parties presumed as the instigators of the campaign are either ignorant of the reality of Ethiopian Muslim society and Ahabash faction or they are cheating the mass by magnifying the evils of the so called “Wahhabiyya” sect. They say that teaching strictness in worship of only one God is Islam’s basic tenet and it shouldn’t be linked to any sect. Nevertheless, Ethiopian Muslim preachers hardly encourage their followers to demolish the shrines of saints. What they do is discouraging the people visiting the shrines of saintly figures.

On the other hand, many Muslims believe that the growing observance of religious practices by Ethiopian Muslims cannot be attached to external sources; it is a product brought by Ethiopian Muslims themselves, and it shouldn’t be feared by politicians as a threat to national security. Furthermore, many people stress that due to the so called “growing Wahhabi influence”, Ethiopian Muslims don’t change the good conduct of religious tolerance for which they have been known for centuries.

## **The Two Campaigns in Practice**

Ethiopian Muslims say that “the Ahabashism campaign” officially began in July/2011 when the Ministry of the Federal Affairs of Ethiopia and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (Majlis) arranged a training session for 600 Muslim clerics elected from different parts of the country. The luxurious training had taken place in one campus of Haramaya University (located in East Ethiopia). The Minister of the Federal Affairs announced on spot that the government allocated more than 11,000,000 Ethiopian Birr (800,000 USD) for a series of trainings focusing on peace and religious tolerance. The trainers came from Beirut where the Ahabash headquarter is located.

However, the majority of the Muslims explain that the training was not focused on religious tolerance as the Minister of Federal Affairs said. The main course of the session was titled “The Evil Caused by Wahhabiyyah”. Even in some occasions, the Lebanese Ahabash scholars were seen enforcing the trainees to announce their faith in new form by uttering the two oaths of Islam (i.e. saying “There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”).

Similar trainings were undertaken throughout the whole of the country. Those who refused to participate in the trainings would be removed from the leadership of the district and Zonal “Majlis” and from being imam of the mosques. As result, thousands were thrown out of the mosques where they served the community for many years.

Since August/2011, the government officials were undertaking a terrorizing media campaign. On one occasion, the Minister of the Federal Affairs said “The government has officially declared ‘Wahhabiya’ to be an extremist sect that strives to topple the constitution and install an Islamic state”. (His statement was published on the Weekly Amharic called “Reporter”). Documentary films and Radio programs were broadcasted on the state run media. The press owned by the government continuously published propaganda articles supporting the Ahabashism campaign.

The government expressed its support to the “Majlis” when the latter deposed the committees of different Islamic madrasa (schools). It also stood on the side of the “Majlis” when 50 teachers of Aweliya Islamic College were sacked and the college was put under the board of the directors lead by Majlis representatives; some of them are well-known members of Ahabash (the current chairperson of the board is Sheikh Azzam Yusuf, vice president of the Federal Majlis and a leading member of Ahabash organization in Ethiopia.).

Meanwhile, the government opened a massive harassment campaign especially in the countryside. Thousands are reportedly arrested and held in prisons without any charges. Many scholars were prohibited from teaching Islamic subjects.

The Ahabashism campaign was met by an “Anti-Ahabashism Campaign” in which the majority of the Muslims are expressing their discontent and disapproval of the Ahabashism campaign. Many writers have challenged the legality of the government’s intervention in the religious affairs of the Muslims. By using different media outlets and the press, many people are warning about the

evil motives of Ahabash ideology. Through different websites and social networking channels, they are telling to the world the challenges they were facing on their faith.

The strongest of all anti-Ahabashism resistance movements is the peaceful public demonstration being held weekly at Aweliya College and many mosques of Addis Ababa and other towns. The start of the movement was a small demonstration undertaken by the students of Aweliya College about three months ago when the “Majlis” sacked 50 teachers of the college. It then remained a weekly public rally confined in Aweliya college and its surroundings where hundreds of thousands of Muslims pray the mandatory Friday Prayer (Salatul Jum’a) together and speak against “the Ahabashism campaign” in one voice. On the third public rally at Aweliya (January 28/2012), the attendants of the mass movement elected a committee which represents them and speak on their behalf. Through a massive networking and petition collecting activity undertaken in few days, the committee has got support from millions of the citizens. The government approved the committee’s legal status and invited it to discuss the demand of the Muslim society. Three critical questions were presented to the government:

1. The current leadership of the “Majlis” doesn’t represent the Muslims, so it must be substituted by an elected representatives of the Muslim society (it is said that the last election of the Majlis leadership was undertaken in 2000)
2. The “Majlis” should stop indoctrinating the people with Ahabash ideology (But Ahabash can preach its ideology on independently)
3. The Aweliya Islamic institute should be administered by an independent board of directors which has no attachment to the “Majlis”

At the start the government resembled a positive arbitrator. It promised to answer the questions in a positive way and appointed the committee members for another discussion. When the discussion was held on the planned date, however, it turned back against its words. The government openly said “The problem of our country is not Ahabash. It is Wahhabiya who has been fueling religious tensions in the country. Churches and mosques were burned and many people were slaughtered by Wahhabiyya. Places like Aweliya were serving the Wahhabiya sect to expand. We won’t allow this anymore. We will continue to suppress the Wahhabiya sect”. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on his recent speech in Ethiopian parliament (April 17/2012) denied any government interference while he was heard praising the Ahabash ideology.

Having heard the response of the government, the mass of Ethiopian Muslims have increased their opposition in all fronts. The protests spread from “Awoliya compound” to the mosques of Addis Ababa. On April 20/2012, about one million people have demonstrated in Aweliya institute and other places to shout for the right of Ethiopian Muslims. Similar protests continue in the whole of the country.

In one of the protests that took place at Assasa town (Arsi province, Oromiya regional state) on April 27/2012, the Federal police security forces killed at last seven protesters and wounded

many more. The government said that the protesters were killed when they burned down a police station and a post office to demand the release of certain “Jihadist” imam. But witnesses say the people were killed outside a mosque of the town when they protested at the arresting of a religious scholar called Sheikh Su’ud Aman.

The news about the incident of Assasa spread throughout the country and aggravated the tension between government and the people. Despite the government’s announcement to take repressive measures, in the next Friday (May 5/2012), the Muslim protests even spread to towns of Somali Afar regions. And more protests are occurring in the country. In an interview with the Voice of America, Sheikh Abubeker Ahmed, the head of the committee elected at Aweliya to speak on behalf of the Muslim majority, said that some authorities of the government are defaming the committee members by using statements like “These people are leading a group of hooligans”. He further said “We are not asking any illegal question. All what we ask are the rights of the Muslims which the government stated in the constitution of the country. We will not retreat back because of the more recent propaganda war”

The Assasa killing also caused international media to report about the ongoing protests in Ethiopia. Famous newspapers like Washington Post and Chicago Tribune start to write about the Ethiopian Muslim protests although half of them based their reports only on the information they got from government’s spokesperson.

On the other hand, due to the pioneering act of Aljazeera channel and some Muslim oriented media ,the problem Ethiopian Muslims have become a discussion topic for international Muslim scholars. For example, two days after the Assasa killings, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the leading Mufti of Sunni Islam and the president of the World Council of Muslim Scholars spoke in favor of Ethiopian Muslims. In his speech broadcasted on the weekly program of Aljazeera titled “Al-Shari’a wal-Hayat” (“the Shari’a and Life”), Professor Yusuf Al-Qaradawi condemned the hijacking of Ethiopian Majlis by “Ahabash” faction and said “This group is an evil one known for its deviation and illegitimate ‘takfir’ (giving edict of apostasy). The followers of the faction are not men of religion. They are people who want to spread evil on this world. They are disturbing the society by distributing rumors and insulting the scholars. The Ethiopians must take of this deviant group”.

Latest unofficial information says that the government decided to dissolve the current leadership of “Majlis” council and to undertake elections for new leadership. It is also briefed that the Federal Affairs Ministry has allocated the finance needed for the elections; the directive of the election is also formulated by the ministry. Amazingly, the informants say that the “Ahabashism” campaign will continue under the future leadership. The majority of Muslims denounce this information and say “We won’t accept any proposal which doesn’t guarantee us on the fulfillment our requests. We continue our struggle until we attain full victory”.

## Conclusion

In this short article I tried to show the start, extents and current status of the “Ahbashism Campaign” in Ethiopia and the reaction it received from the Muslim populace through “Anti-Ahbashism campaign”. The most outstanding outcome of the two campaigns is the bond of unity created among Ethiopian Muslims. Recently, in an interview with OnIslam website, one observer described this outcome by saying “The government and ‘Majlis’ couldn’t draw a line between what they called ‘Sufi’ and ‘Salafi’. We proved we are one”.

Here is the main question. “What will be the future trend?” As a Muslim, I can’t say many words about the future since the future is in the hand of God. But I definitely say neither of the collaborators (Ethiopian Government and “Majlis”) can meet their demand by applying any illegal methodology. And tomorrow is another day!!

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