

The Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia, the Muslim Brotherhood and the issue of moderation

By Terje Østebø and
Walleign Shemsedin

■ Executive summary

The Intellectualist movement is one of the major Islamic reform movements in contemporary Ethiopia. Informal and decentralised in character, it has attracted young students, professionals and urban intellectuals. The movement was inspired to a great extent by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, which were critically contextualised and applied to the Ethiopian context. This has entailed avoiding the more political aspects of Brotherhood thinking while emphasising the positive role of Islamic virtues in the formation of individual and societal piety. The Intellectualists have further been formative for Ethiopian Muslims' thinking about secularism, democracy and constitutional rule, and have played a significant role in mediating between various religious actors in Ethiopia, as well as negotiating the position of Islam in relation to the political authorities. Of particular importance is the way in which the movement has served as a moderating force in a rapidly changing and fluid political and religious landscape. This demonstrates the inherent complexity of the trend commonly labelled as Islamism, and points to the need for nuanced and localised approaches when trying to understand this trend.

Post-1991 Ethiopia has seen the surfacing and expansion of several Islamic reform movements, producing both an increasingly heterogeneous religious landscape and accusations of increasing radicalisation. Important among these movements is the Intellectualist movement, which is playing a significant role in shaping the current generation of young Muslims. Inspired by ideas stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood, which were critically selected and adopted to the local context, the Intellectualist movement could be labelled an Islamist movement, but has not constituted a "radicalising" force in Ethiopia. Rather, it has promoted a discourse of moderation, negotiating between various religious actors, and between the Muslim community and the Ethiopian government.

The Intellectualist movement is an important case in point in relation to the fluidity and dynamics found in what is commonly known as Islamism, an ideology usually portrayed as aiming at Islamising the state, often through violent means. While the Muslim Brotherhood in general is viewed as fundamental for the development of this ideology, it is important to note that a range of views has always existed in the Brotherhood on the means for achieving an

Islamist political order, what this order actually entails and less state-centred ideas. In addition, recent and ongoing events in the Muslim world have further contributed to augmenting the ideological dynamism in the Islamist movement. What we see is more complex and multifaceted thinking around questions such as liberal democracy, secularism and the political role of sharia, which produces a complex picture where actors cannot easily be dichotomised as moderate or extremist (Abed-Kotob, 1995; Pahwa, 2013; Zollner, 2009).

Although drawing inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Intellectualists have never formed a local Brotherhood chapter in Ethiopia, nor have they established any formal links with the Brotherhood abroad. They have adhered to some Muslim Brotherhood ideas, yet have carefully selected only those found to be relevant to their immediate context. In particular, they actively sought to avoid the Brotherhood's political thinking on state power and political rule according to Islamic law, and have always operated within and accepted Ethiopia's secular framework, while working for the betterment of the Muslim community.

The Intellectualist movement first emerged at Addis Ababa University after the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, where it recruited young students – and later professionals and urban intellectuals – into its ranks. The movement's activities revolved around organising and running small study and discussion groups, and arranging regular public lectures. Informal and decentred in character, it never managed to establish any lasting organisational structures and had no formalised leadership. It remained rather elitist in character and limited to the capital. Pivotal for the movement's emergence and expansion was the arrival of Islamic literature – in English. This literature appealed to a young educated generation, and served as an important point of contact with broader discourses in the Muslim world. Local and foreign non-governmental organisations surfacing in the early 1990s were instrumental in making books and magazines available. Particularly important among these NGOs were Sudanese organisations, which were, however, closed down by the government in the mid-1990s. Subsequent increasing government restrictions did not affect the Intellectualist movement much, because its informal character enabled it to continue to operate relatively undisturbed.

The movement was weakened by internal tensions in the early 2000s – conflicts that were about both leadership and the movement's ideological profile. Much of the latter was related to the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood. One faction favoured modelling the Intellectualist movement on the Brotherhood, while the opposing faction emphasised the uniqueness of Ethiopia in terms of the nature of Islam's indigenous history and of the country's particular form of religious pluralism, and argued that copying any outside movement would be detrimental to the local context. This also led to the fragmentation of the movement and gave some influential figures the opportunity to carve out space to operate relatively independently.

While critically appropriating the ideas stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood meant avoiding explicit references to the Islamic state and rule by sharia, the Intellectualists found much inspiration in the Brotherhood's emphasis on Islamic virtues and personal piety. This was a highly important aspect of the movement's teaching that played a pivotal role in the formation of a newly found religious identity among young Ethiopian Muslim generations. The construction of the pious self was never an inward-looking project, such as the Salafis, but was perceived as having societal consequences. The idea was that the creation of pious Muslim individuals would play a constructive role in the formation of a morally sound Ethiopian society, and Muslim youth were encouraged to become involved in affairs beyond the religious community.

Its decision to avoid politics and the issue of state power does not mean that the Intellectualist movement has been oblivious to politics as such. In fact, it has been highly conscious of questions pertaining to secularism,

democracy, religious rights and constitutional rule, and has been crucial in elaborating Muslim thinking on these matters. While constantly advocating moderation, it has remained vocal in struggling for the rights of the Muslim community and working toward improving religious equality and accommodating Ethiopia's religious pluralism. The issue of moderation has also been at the core of the movement's efforts to mediate among religious actors in the Muslim community. While working for intra-religious unity, it has sought to buttress the expansion of uncompromising forces and ideas, criticising many Salafi attitudes in particular.

As a crucial actor in setting the agenda for the discourse in Ethiopia for two decades, the Intellectualist influence has been particularly significant in recent years in terms of the Muslim demonstrations taking place in Ethiopia from 2011 onwards. These demonstrations were related to a gradually more intrusive government policy towards Islam and to what Muslims viewed as unconstitutional interference in their religious affairs. Whereas the government has portrayed these demonstrations as yet another sign of Islamic radicalisation, our interpretation is that they are in fact an indication of moderation. Claiming that the government had violated its own constitution, the protesters' rhetoric revolved around maintaining the secular order, respecting religious rights and upholding the rule of law. By holding the authorities accountable for violating these principles, the protests served as an educational experience for Muslims that has strengthened their understanding of and adherence to the secular state.

There are certainly ambiguities in the ways in which the Intellectualists understand secularism and the role of religion in the Ethiopian context. This should not come as a surprise, however: other societies with a far longer secularist history struggle with similar questions. This also relates to how religious actors in a post-secular age are seeking to reinterpret the meaning of secularism, calling for new perspectives on how to implement the established secular principle regarding the separation of religion and the state. Secularism in itself is an ongoing process, as is clear in the Ethiopian case. The Intellectualist movement, with all its internal diversity, remains an important voice in the ongoing formation of the country's future.

In conclusion, the ideas and activities of the Intellectualist movement serve to adjust the picture often presented by the Ethiopian government and some outside observers of an increasing radicalisation of Islam in Ethiopia and points to a more complex reality. As a case, the Intellectualist movement also demonstrates the need to properly analyse local representations of Muslim Brotherhood ideas through a conceptual lens that recognises the inherent complexity found in what is generally labelled as Islamism. The Intellectualist movement is an illustration of the fact that Islamism is about far more than seeking state power for the establishment of an Islamic order, and points to how multifaceted Muslim politics actually is.

References

Abed-Kotob, S. 1995. "The accommodationists speak: goals and strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt."

International Journal of Middle East Studies, 27(3): 321-39.

Pahwa, S. 2013. "Secularizing Islamism and Islamizing democracy: the political and ideational evolution of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, 1984-2012." *Mediterranean Politics*, 18(2): 189-206.

Zollner, B. H. E. 2009. *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.



■ THE AUTHORS

Terje Østebø received his PhD in the history of religions from Stockholm University in 2009. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Religion and the Center for African Studies and acting director of the Center for Global Islamic Studies at the University of Florida, as well as a senior researcher (part-time) at the International Law and Policy Institute in Oslo, Norway.

Walleign Shemsedin obtained his MPharm in 2006 and is currently finalising his MPhil in philosophy, both at Addis Ababa University. He has been a lecturer in pharmacy for eight years and is currently the technical manager of a pharmaceutical firm. He has also been a close observer of Ethiopian Muslim issues for the past 18 years.

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the organisations for which they work or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- **The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre**
- **Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging**

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32