

# ***Ethiopian Muslims and the discourse about moderation***

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides insights into particular aspects of contemporary Islamic reformism in Ethiopia, focusing on what we have labelled the Intellectualist movement. Analysing the trajectory and the ideological underpinnings of the movement from the early 1990s to the present, the study interrogates the assertion that Ethiopian Islam has moved in a radical direction and argues that the Intellectualist movement has been a significant force moderating the domestic political-religious discourses. We demonstrate that it contributed to the production of political awareness among generations of young Ethiopian Muslims, which rather than contesting the existing political system, moved in a direction of a strengthened belief in secularism and democratic values. What is important here is that this took place in an increasingly constraining political environment, which, as often assumed, did not trigger any reaction of radicalization, but rather reinforced the adherence to a moderating discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

This article provides insights into particular aspects of contemporary Islamic reformism in Ethiopia, focusing on what we have labelled the Intellectualist movement. The name is an *epic* one, and the movement had the form of an informal, de-institutionalised and de-centred network of likeminded individuals. These were mainly students and

public intellectuals, who, inspired by a similar set of ideas, came together to read books, to listen to lectures, and to engage each other in discussions about religious ideas and practice. In doing so, the movement became pivotal in shaping Muslims' identities, facilitating debates about the role of Islam in the Ethiopian society.

Analysing the trajectory and the ideological underpinnings of the Intellectualist movement from the early 1990s to the present, the article interrogates the assertion that Ethiopian Islam has moved in a radical direction and demonstrates how such a claim conflates a far more complex picture. Pointing to how the Intellectualist movement has been a significant force moderating the domestic political–religious discourses, we argue that it contributed to the production of political awareness among generations of young Ethiopian Muslims, which rather than contesting the existing political system, moved in a direction of a strengthened belief in secularism, democratic values and constitutional rule. Secularism relates in this context particularly to state–religion separation, and non-interference of one in the other's sphere, while democratic values relates to freedom of expression and religious freedom. We will moreover demonstrate that such a process of moderation took place in increasingly authoritarian political realities, which entailed the curbing of Muslims' operational space. While it is often assumed that this would generate polarisation and augment radicalisation, we argue this rather reinforced the adherence to a moderating discourse. As such, the article highlights the importance of internal religious discourses in curtailing radicalisation – something too often overlooked in 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) programmes (cf. Kessels 2010). This was something unequivocally expressed by one of our informants, who said that 'the Intellectualists' ideas saved Ethiopia. These were moderate ideas, and they blocked other more extreme ideas from entering' (Informant 1, 2014 int.).<sup>1</sup>

The study builds on one of the author's earlier work on Islamic reform movements in Ethiopia (Østebø 2008), and is also one of two outputs of a recent study on the Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia, where the other article (Østebø 2016) in a complementary manner focuses on the movement's informal structure and its importance for the shaping of religious identity. The data were mainly collected through interviews with leaders and members of the Intellectualist movement, as well as with observers of the religious and political developments. The authors have been following the movement for over a decade, and have formed close contacts with key figures.

## MODERATION, ISLAMISM AND MUSLIM POLITICS

We use the term moderate – and its bipolar opposite, extremist – rather reluctantly, believing that they are more concealing than illuminating. There is a clear normative aspect intrinsic to these concepts, in the sense that their meaning is dependent on the evaluative role of the definer: being in a privileged position to both conceptualise and to empirically categorise the moderate-extremist dichotomy. This has become increasingly apparent with reference to Islam over the last decades, where a rigid dichotomisation between the good and the bad Muslim (Mamdani 2004) has painted an artificial picture where the former is hailed as the ally and the bulwark against the latter – largely becoming a synonym for an existential threat. There is also a tendency to treat the moderate–extremist dichotomy as singular, delineating a linear trajectory from the moderate to the extremist (Al-Lami 2009), and that efforts should be made – through various ‘winning-the-hearts-and-minds’ programmes – to prevent the moderate from entering the extremist path. When we nevertheless use these terms, we do so largely because they have gained common currency in the politicised and securitised discourse around Islam and CVE measures. Our intention is to demonstrate that the moderate–extremist dichotomy constitutes processes rather than fixed states, that moderation is not necessarily dependent upon states’ or other outside actors’ efforts, and that such processes encompass far more multifaceted trajectories than is commonly assumed; trajectories that sometimes take unexpected directions.

The question of outside actors – in the form of regime-policies – and moderation of Muslim movements has been addressed by Schwedler (2006). In her ‘inclusion-moderation hypothesis’ she argues that regimes’ inclusion of Islamist movements, in the sense of integrating them into the political framework and allowing them to participate in elections often causes Islamist movements to become more moderate; moderation here understood as refraining from the use of violence, the acceptance of democratic rules, and the willingness to strike alliances with non-Islamist and non-religious parties. The logic of the thesis would then be that regimes’ exclusivist policies of limiting the operational space and suppression of religious actors would have the opposite effect of producing radicalisation (Abadie 2004) – in the sense of ‘hostility to democratic institutions and values’ (Driessen 2010: 172). Such a trajectory has been confirmed by others who point to how repressive state policies constitute an important factor for producing violent reactions and driving groups in a radical direction

(de Figueiredo & Weingast 2001; Lake 2002; Borgu 2004). There are, we argue, certain problems with Schwedler's thesis, where the main one is that it overestimates the role of outside political actors. We will in the following demonstrate that moderation in this case was less a result of state policies, but rather produced by internal religious actors. As such we seek to underscore the agency of such actors in determining ideological trajectories.

The Intellectualist movement was very much inspired by ideas stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation commonly considered as the main representative for the ideology of Islamism.<sup>2</sup> This ideology is characterised by its hallmarks of considering democracy and a secular legal and political system man-made and hence illegitimate innovations. Claiming that God is the sovereign ruler and law-giver, Islamism's aim would be to exchange the secular with an Islamic political order. This means that the Islamists view the state as the vehicle for an encompassing Islamisation, thus making taking control over the state, often through violent means, crucial. The problem, however, is that the Muslim Brotherhood has never been ideologically coherent. The movement's history has revealed a complex ideological trajectory, seen particularly around debates on what the Islamic order actually would mean, around the strategies for achieving such an order, as well as around participation in the existing political order (Wickham 2002, 2013; El-Ghobashi 2005). This ideological complexity has become even more pronounced through the trajectory of the Turkish AKP party – and its precursors – and the developments in the post-Arab Spring, particularly in relation to the rise and fall of the Morsi government and the debates around the Ennadha party in Tunisia. All these events have produced a complex and multifaceted thinking around questions such as liberal democracy, secularism, the political role of Islam, and consequently made Islamism something that is increasingly difficult to define.

The ambiguity surrounding Islamism has produced a debate about the utility of the concept (Martin & Barzegar 2010), as well as generating other alternative concepts such as Muslimhood (White 2014), *Islam Mondain* (French: Islam in the modern world) (Soares & Otayek 2007) and Post-Islamism (Roy 1999; Bayat 2007, 2013). While many of these terms may have value, a pertinent question is whether there is a need for a single concept to capture Muslim politics in all its diversity. Why are we so concerned with Muslims' engagement in politics that it deserves particular labels, while this seems not to be the case for other religious traditions? Obviously, this is spurred by movements that

vehemently oppose the democratic framework, and which seek to establish a political Islamic order through violent means. The dilemma is, however, that this overshadows the existence of other forms of Muslim politics that recognise peaceful competition within a democratic framework. Our argument is that such forms of politics performed by Muslims – like going to the ballot box, participating in media debates, or running for office – cannot be contained by any exhaustive label. Such politics could, to a varying degree, be based upon religious preferences, would cover a broad ideological spectrum, and would be applied in very dissimilar ways. This relates directly to the problems with the moderate-extremist dichotomy, and with reference to Thomas Pierret, we argue that Muslims' engagement in politics should not uncritically be labelled Islamism and be reduced to inevitable stepping-stones towards the establishment of an Islamic state (2013: 331). Rather, the content of such politics will never be a given, but will depend on the nature of the actors involved, on the dynamics of their ideological preferences, and on the parameters of the particular contexts in which they are played out. This means, in turn, that even if the Intellectualist movement drew inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood it becomes impossible to put them in one coherent categorical box.

#### THE IDEOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY OF THE INTELLECTUALIST MOVEMENT

The Intellectualist movement emerged at a time when Ethiopia was undergoing significant political changes. Assuming power in 1991, The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced an initial – and unprecedented – liberal policy of recognising the country's ethnic and religious diversity. This was in stark contrast to the suppressive policy during the Derg period, and meant for the Muslims the reversal of earlier restrictions on religious practice and propagation, the recognition of Muslim holidays, and the freedom to develop a religious infrastructure. It is quite interesting to see how this immediately paved the way for increased religious activism and to the surfacing of different Islamic organisations and reform movements.<sup>3</sup>

The Intellectualist movement first emerged at the campus of Addis Ababa University in the early 1990s, organising places for prayers, informal discussion forums in the dormitories, and special programmes with invited speakers. Recruitment was through personal interactions at the campuses, face-to-face meetings in the capital's mosques, as well as

through regular public lectures. There was no defined and institutionalised leadership, but figures such as Idris Muhammad, a native of Dessie in Wollo, and Hassan Taju of Gondar played significant roles as de facto leaders. The former, who joined Addis Ababa University in 1990, was from an early stage well-versed in Islamic scholarship, and the latter, who joined the university in 1992, was considered Idris's main 'student'. The concept of network of meaning (Melucci 1989) is fitting for understanding the movement's informal character, meaning that such networks are – rather than instruments for reformist actions – venues for ideological production and appropriation, and for the creation of new selves.<sup>4</sup>

Foundational for the emergence of the Intellectualist movement was the sudden accessibility of religious literature after 1991. While classical Islamic scholarship certainly has a long history in Ethiopia, the new situation was the arrival of a broader range of religious literature – made available through EPRDF's policy of liberalisation. A substantial part of this was in Arabic, and some of it was translated into Amharic and published by the Huda, Hira and Nejashi printing presses. Most of these books were of a Salafi nature, authored by Saudi Arabian *ulama*, and came to attract Salafis who were fluent in Arabic (cf. Hussein 1998a).

For a young generation not proficient in Arabic, and who to a large extent had been alienated from the religious heritage during the Derg period, the availability of religious literature in English facilitated a sort of 'discovery' of Islam. Informants talked about how books 'changed me', about how 'we got a feeling for Islam through books', and that they 'gave direction for our thoughts' (Informant 2 2007 int.). Instrumental in bringing this type of religious literature were Islamic NGOs, both foreign and local – importing and distributing books, pamphlets and magazines. The international NGOs included the African Muslim Agency from Kuwait, the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Federation of Student Organization (IFSO),<sup>5</sup> while the most influential local NGO was the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association (EMYA) established in 1992 under the leadership of Sheikh Sayid Ahmed Mustafa and Muhammad Usman. It had a large library in Addis Ababa where the youth had free access to Islamic literature, organised training and camps for the youth, and actively recruited followers through visits to the capital's mosques (Informant 3 2006 int.). While the EMYA ideologically tilted in a Salafi direction, this was, according to our informants, initially not particularly so. However, as funding from Saudi Arabia increased, and links with the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY) in Riyadh were established, the Salafi affiliation

became more pronounced (Informant 3 2006 int.; Informant 4 2006 int.).<sup>6</sup> In addition, there were also various Islamic magazines surfacing, of which *Bilal* and *Dawa* were the main ones. *Bilal* dealt with both explicit religious topics and with current local and international affairs, and had Idris Muhammad as a regular writer.<sup>7</sup>

Defining the ideological parameters of the Intellectualist movement is challenging. The Muslim Brotherhood was clearly a major source of inspiration, but the influence extended to a range of so-called modernist Muslim thinkers such as the Shi'a scholar Ali Shiratti, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Lebanese Fathi Yakan, the Bosnian Alija Izetbegović and the Indian Abul Hassan Ali Hasani Nadwi. The curriculum also included Salafi writings such as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's *Usul Thalatha* and *Kitab al-Tawhid*. The important books stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood were those by Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and Fathi Yakan, the founder of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood. Particularly important were al-Banna's *Six Tracks* and Yakan's *To be a Muslim*. Ideas were not introduced in any coherent and systematic manner, however, and the wide variety of ideas arriving through different books created a rather compound ideological picture. This was further affected by the movement's informal and de-centred character which impinged on the production of a coherent programme. Except for a few of the leading figures who were more conscious of broader ideological discourses, most of those involved in the movement during the 1990s were not particularly aware that the ideas influencing them were from the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if books by Sayyid Qutb were widely read in the early 1990s, there were few who associated him with the Muslim Brotherhood. Only gradually did such awareness develop: 'we started to realise that the books we were reading were Muslim Brotherhood books' (Informant 5 2014 int.).

Similar to the Muslim Brotherhood's structure the movement's basic unit was the loosely organised discussion groups labelled as *usra*. A larger unit was the *shuba* which was organised when major issues were to be discussed.<sup>8</sup> The meetings were held in private houses, shrouded with a sort of secrecy, where members should not arrive and leave at the same time. This secrecy was, rather than reflecting something illegal, more 'a reflection of belonging to something special' (Informant 6 2014 int.). Most of those involved belonged to the same social networks – friends coming together in groups – and in many cases there seem to have been no organised connections between the groups. It was moreover an ephemeral phenomenon, constantly attracting new members, and seeing older ones leaving the movement. The Intellectualists never created any mass-movement, and during its 'golden age' (1991–1995), there were

hardly more than 10–12 groups (Informant 3 2014 int.; Informant 4 2006 int.; Informant 6 2014 int.). The leaders and key figures were all males, and women did not play any major role in the movement. It remained an urban phenomenon concentrated in Addis Ababa, withdrawn from the broader public, and with a base restricted to students, university graduates and a small Muslim intellectual class. Attempts to form a more formal leadership structure were made around 1993 with the establishment of a *shura* (council), but that lasted only for a few years.

Its decentred and informal structure made it fragile and prone to inside fractions, and internal lingering tensions climaxed in a major conflict in 2003. While the conflict was largely related to personal issues and the question of leadership, it also had an ideological dimension – connected to the question about the Muslim Brotherhood. Not that there was any discussion about establishing any local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Ethiopia, but some emphasised the universal character of Islam, that Muslims in Ethiopia should consider themselves as part of a global Islamic movement, and be open and attached to on-going currents within the broader Muslim world. They thus argued that associating oneself with the Muslim Brotherhood was intrinsic to this, and favoured a closer ideological affinity and an educational scheme modelled upon the movement (Informant 6 2014 int.). The opposing faction, led by Idris Muhammad and Hassan Taju, repeatedly underscored the uniqueness of the Ethiopian case, and argued that the Muslim Brotherhood would be ill-fitting for the particularities of the local context: ‘[we] didn’t want to copy everything from the Muslim Brotherhood, we said that Islam in Ethiopia was unique, and we had to focus on the local context’ (Informant 4 2013 int.). They also opposed any uncritical import of any foreign ideology to the Ethiopian context: ‘we have to think in our own ways. To be dependent on any outside movement kills the native thinking’ (Informant 3 2014 int.). They also argued that a more formal attachment to the Muslim Brotherhood would be detrimental for the movement: ‘It was a deliberate choice not to organise any group. We knew that if we created an organisation, the government would be curious ... [it] would have cracked down on us’ (Informant 3 2014 int.).

The conflict weakened the movement, and whereas one faction of the leadership continued the activities around the discussion groups, recruitment stagnated. It also became increasingly fragmented, where senior leaders such as Idris Muhammad and Hassan Taju withdrew from the movement and continued their activities on an individual basis.



The former established himself as a popular public speaker, while the latter emerged as a prolific writer and translator of Islamic literature from Arabic.

The ideological affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood, the presence of international NGOs, and the availability of 'foreign' literature easily confirm the notion of 'extremism' as a force arriving from the outside, manipulating otherwise 'tolerant' local Muslims. However, not only does such a view conflate the rich ideological diversity inherent to trans-local Islamic discourses, it also seriously demotes the agency of local Muslims. The Intellectualists were not passive receivers of outside influence, but displayed a high degree of agency in selectively and critically appropriating novel ideas to their particular context. Operating in an unsettled religious landscape inhabited by a range of other religious currents and gradually relating to an increasingly hegemonic state, the Intellectualists managed to exercise a strong influence on the young Muslim generations, and contributed much to directing the internal religious discourse of moderation among them.

#### THE DISCOURSE OF MODERATION

The Intellectualists were not in any way apolitical, but held from the very beginning elaborate views on issues such as democracy, constitutional rule, multiculturalism and secularism – actively discussed in the reading groups. And, they were consciously situating themselves within a democratic and secular framework, circumventing any extreme positions.

Intrinsic to this discourse was the emphasis on opposing any form of infusion of religion into politics. This meant that they directly avoided the more explicit political aspects of the Muslim Brotherhood's teaching. Even if the above-mentioned conflict brought out different views about the Brotherhood, each faction shared this resistance towards its political ideas. Making reference to how these ideas had upset peace even in Muslim-dominating countries, the argument was that such ideas would not only be impossible, but also devastating for Ethiopia. This position was made with reference to the uniqueness of Ethiopia, and in particular its religious plurality, and the Intellectualists always underscored the need to maintain good inter-religious relations.

Ethiopia's particular religious history was crucial for the Intellectualists' – and the broader Ethiopian Muslim population's – commitment to the secular order, seeing this as the system most suitable to secure their equal rights. The point of reference here was the history

of Christian dominance under a confessional state, which had reduced the Muslims to secondary citizens. While it would be possible to interpret the support for secularism as based upon tactical considerations, and although there were Muslims who viewed secularism as a Western thing – incompatible with Islam – it is clear that there was a faith in secularism. It was more than a tool for securing equal rights of Muslims, but rather crucial for the accommodation of religious rights and peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims. This was reflected by leading figures among the Intellectualists who formulated elaborate views in support of secularism, based both upon Islamic traditions and the particularities of Islam in Ethiopia. References were made to the Qur'an, to the Medina Constitution, through which the Prophet had struck an accord with non-Muslims, and in particular, to the time of the Axumite Hijrah, when Muslims were living under the protection of the Christian king – constituting what was referred to as the 'Abyssinian model' (Informant 3 2016 int.). The conclusion was that secularism was something fully compatible with Islam.

The Intellectualists also played a significant moderating role within Ethiopia's religious landscape, admonishing religious excesses and mitigating between movements or religious reform. They became part of a development which saw a stricter demarcation of intra-religious boundaries, yet sought, at the same time, to negotiate these boundaries. The other main Islamic reform movements, the Jama'at al-Tabligh and the Salafi movement, were similarly decentred, and ideological boundaries between the different movements (including the Intellectualist) were initially rather porous. The Tablighis were strong and active from the start of the 1990s, while the Salafis were rapidly gaining ground in post-Derg Ethiopia. The Intellectualists viewed both movements positively as moderate ones, and were attracted by their emphasis on personal piety – and by the Salafis' scholarly tradition.

However, as the Intellectualists developed a more pronounced awareness of their own ideological identity, they also became more critical toward the other reform movements. Considering the Muslim Brotherhood as a mainstream movement, and selectively appropriating its ideas, they made a strong point of presenting themselves as *the* moderate Islamic alternative in the Ethiopian context. The Tablighis were seen as too docile, too much focused on piety and too inward-looking, lacking any social and political engagement. Yet, it was the Salafi movement that became the main target for the Intellectualists' critique. Gradually questioning the Salafi teaching, the Intellectualists condemned the Salafis' uncompromising attitudes toward Sufism and

indigenous representations of Islam in Ethiopia. The perception was that the Salafis were becoming too 'radical' and that they went too far in their critique of these traditions, consequently creating unnecessary rifts among the Muslims. Accused of being too occupied with religious purity, the Salafis were also castigated for their unwarranted zealotry and their exaggeration of minor details related to religious practice. Another important aspect of the Intellectualists' critique was directed towards the Salafis' inwardness, accusing them for not getting involved in societal affairs, and for ignoring working for the well-being of the Muslim community.

The Intellectualists' moderating efforts came particularly to the front with the emergence of the Takfir wal Hijra, which arrived in 1994–95 through Sudan, growing strong in the northern town of Gondar and in the suburbs of Addis Ababa. Distancing themselves from the Christians, they also severed their connections to other Muslims, including other Salafis, who through the practice of *takfir* – declaring someone an apostate – were labelled as *kuffar* (sing., *kaafir*; non-believers) (Østebø 2012: 253f.). The Intellectualists, led by Hassan Taju, soon became instrumental in challenging the Takfiris – launching fierce attacks upon them through his book *Takfir: Error and Corrections* (Taju 2002). This led to a marked shift for the support of the group, and when the group's main leader died in 2004, the Takfiris had lost their real strength.

Hassan Taju was also instrumental in mediating tensions between the Salafi and Sufi factions in Ethiopia. Similar to other African contexts (Loimeier 1997: 308; Kobo 2015), mainstream Ethiopian Salafis were becoming more accommodating toward Sufism, but the unique feature in Ethiopia was the creation of a concrete forum aimed at alleviating the tense relations. The Addis Ababa Ulama Unity Forum (AAUUF), established in 2007, became the venue for leading scholars from both sides to meet weekly to discuss a range of controversial religious issues for nearly two years. The Salafis were led by Dr Jeylan Khedir and the Sufis by Hajj Umar Idris, and through a dialogue facilitated by Hassan Taju, the two sides were able to gradually come closer to each other. This came to an abrupt halt in February 2009, when the forum was banned (Feyissa & Lawrence 2014). Whereas this was formally done through the EIASC, those closely involved in the forum unequivocally claim that the real force behind these measures was the government. The dialogue did manage, however, to narrow ideological differences within the Muslim community, leaving the Madkhalis to be

viewed as the few remaining ‘hardliners’ producing rifts within the Muslim community (Informant 3 2014 int.).

The Madkhaliyyah group, often referred to locally as the ‘Super Salafis’, emerged around 2006. The name was in reference to their adherence to the Saudi Arabian Salafi quietist scholar, Rabi ibn Hadi al-Madkhali. He had been a student of Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–1999), a highly influential Salafi scholar who strongly opposed Islamist political activism.<sup>9</sup> This position came to be the hallmark of the local Ethiopian Madkhalis, who argued that Muslims should stay away from politics, and rather focus on *da’wa* and religious education (Østebø, 2012: 258; Informant 7 2013 int.). Lack of political engagement was the basis for the Intellectualists’ criticism of the Madkhalis, accusing them for being too narrow-minded by overtly focusing on details of ritual practice, and thus betraying the struggle for the betterment of Ethiopian Muslims. The Madkhalis, in response, derogatorily criticised the Intellectualists for being part of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had the effect of highlighting the Intellectualists’ Muslim Brotherhood label (Informant 8 2014 int.).

In sum, it is clear that the Intellectualists played a significant role in mending tensions within the Muslim community. Moderation remained a key issue for them, and negotiating their position in an increasingly heterogeneous religious terrain, and mediating between the Muslims and the political authorities, they were constantly advocating compromise over ideological rigidity. Valorising the indigenous Ethiopian Islamic traditions and finding inspiration from broader religious currents, they were seeking out new ways of being Muslim fitting for their particular local context.

#### DE-LIBERALISATION AND THE NARROWING OF OPERATIONAL SPACE

Ethiopia’s secular character is enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, which separates religion and state (Art. 11), prohibits any state-religion, and which also hinders government interference in religious matters. It also guarantees freedom of religion, belief and opinion, including the right of believers to ‘establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion’ (Art. 27). This became the basis for EPRDF’s initial liberal religious policy, allowing, as noted, the revitalisation of religious affiliation and expressions. An important aspect of this was the way religion emerged as physically visible in the public sphere, seen for example through the growth in the number of

mosques and Protestant churches, through public performance of religious rituals, and, particularly for Islam, through changes in Muslim dress-codes. Accompanying these changes was increased competition of public space, consequently producing more fragile inter-religious relations, occasionally erupting into violent conflicts.

The EPRDF viewed the physical expansion of religion and subsequent inter-religious tensions as signs that Islam – in particular – was becoming increasingly radicalised. This was related to regional developments, especially in Somalia, and the global post-9/11 situation, producing a ‘politics of fear’ (Sivanandan 2006) and perceptions that did not always correspond to the actual religious developments. As a consequence, the government shifted its policy from the mid-1990s, resulting in a more constraining political environment and to the loss of much of the space Muslims had acquired since 1990s. This was first triggered by a large Muslim demonstration in November 1994, organised by the EYMA and calling for the inclusion of the *shari’a* law as one of the bases for the new Ethiopian constitution, and the clash between worshippers and police in the capital’s al-Anwar mosque in February 1995. These events provided the government with the opportunity to intervene: arresting hundreds of Muslims and closing down the offices of the EMYA. One particularly important incident, however, was the failed assassination attempt against the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak visiting Addis Ababa in June 1995.<sup>10</sup> Described by one senior official as ‘a turning point, when the camel’s back broke’ and as ‘a shock for Ethiopia’, it constituted a moment which decisively shaped the government’s view of Islam: ‘From then on we became more conscious about the threat of religious extremism’ (Informant 9 2014 int.). As the attack against Mubarak was believed to be an act of an Egyptian Islamist group, supported by the regime in Khartoum, the Ethiopian government reacted by expelling a large number of Egyptian and Sudanese nationals, as well as banning all Sudanese NGOs operating in Ethiopia.

For the Intellectualists, these actions came to have serious implications. The termination of EMYA was, according to one informant ‘a disaster’ (Informant 4 2014 int.), particularly because it also included the closing of the library and the confiscation of its books. The limiting of space for foreign NGOs further reduced access to Islamic literature, consequently depriving the Intellectualists of what had created them in the first place. The irony here is that while religious literature in English became scant, the closure of EMYA provided space for the diffusion of Salafi literature in Arabic – the ideology the government mainly

associated with extremism. While the Intellectualist movement's informal character enabled it to escape the government's increasingly controlling gaze and to continue its activities, the new political situation furthered the decentred and deinstitutionalised character of Ethiopian Islam. It also provided the government with opportunities of co-option, in which the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) – said to represent Muslim interests – effectively became an important means of control.<sup>11</sup>

Compared with an initial 'liberal moment', EPRDF policies have gradually moved in an authoritarian direction, particularly after 2005.<sup>12</sup> This also entailed changes in the direction of a more 'authoritarian laïcité' (Luizard 2008), producing an assertive and even intrusive secularist religious policy that has limited the space for religious expressions in the public and that has emphasised the private character of religion. The practical implementation of secularism has, however, been rather uneven, and has most visibly been played out in the banning of 'Muslim clothing' in institutions of higher learning, and denying Muslim students the possibility to perform communal daily prayers within university premises.<sup>13</sup> The secularist policy was also uneven in the sense of being adamant about religion not entering into politics, and less restrictive in terms of the state's interference in religious affairs.

Developments took a dramatic turn in 2011, signalling even more determined policies from the government, and introducing a new epoch in Muslim-state relations.<sup>14</sup> Crucial here was the introduction of the Lebanese al-Ahbash movement in July 2011, invited by the EIASC and the Ministry of Federal Affairs. Officially called the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), al-Ahbash is a Lebanese organisation devoted to combat any form of 'extremist' Islam, and viewing itself as the leading force for moderation (*al-itidal*).<sup>15</sup> Soon after its introduction, enforced al-Ahbash trainings were conducted throughout the country, where Lebanese instructors and government officials sought to warn Muslims about the alleged rise of Islamic extremism in Ethiopia, and instruct them to adhere to a more moderate version of Islam. The reactions from the Muslim community were immediate and negative, petitioning the government to stop the al-Ahbash campaign. This was to no avail, and the already tense situation was exacerbated by controversies around Awolia College in December 2011, when all the school's Arabic teachers were dismissed and the Arabic curriculum was suspended. This was the spark that ignited weekly protests in the mosques, and which spread to the streets of Addis Ababa during spring 2012. They managed to unite the Muslims across ideological

and ethnic divisions, led and coordinated by the so-called arbitration committee consisting of 17 members. The arrest of the committee (see below) did not halt the protests, which continued unabated and coordinated by a Facebook-page; *Dimtsachen Yesema* (Let Our Voice be Heard) until August 2013.

#### PROTESTS AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF MODERATION

Although the protests, here labelled the Muslim protests, were not in any explicit manner linked to the Intellectualist movement, and while none of the senior Intellectualist figures were part of the leadership, it is clear that the movement had laid the foundations for the reactions triggered by the al-Ahbash campaign. Through its history the Intellectualists had established an alternative framework of meaning, and as an avenue for ideological debates, the movement had managed to carve out social and symbolic space for the realisation of its ideas; ideas that were dominating the discourse among the Muslims. In particular, the writings of Hassan Taju were widely read and accepted, and even the Salafis, seeing the attraction he had among the young generation, were recommending his books. As such, the Intellectualists curtailed the emergence of confrontational approaches and strengthened the discourse of moderation.

An important precursor for the formation of this new young leadership was what came to be known as the Monday Forum, established around 2008. The name refers to the fact that it convened on Mondays, and it was, similarly to the Intellectualist movement, highly informal, revolving around meetings in private homes of people who were close friends. It was composed of individuals with different ideological orientations, and had a far more pragmatic approach to existing divisions. The ideological disparity was, however, an inhibiting factor for the forum to translate their ideas into practice: 'We didn't have any strategy or resources to work practically. None of us were much experienced, and we were bewildered in many ways. We tried to prepare a document stating our aims and goals, but we couldn't' (Informant 10 2014 int.).

While the government portrayed the Monday Forum as a radical element, accusing them of seeking to establish an Islamic state in Ethiopia, there is no evidence pointing in this direction. One member of the Monday Forum responded to this in the following way: 'we couldn't even be punctual to our meetings, and let alone working to establish an Islamic state, we didn't even have the capacity to organise ourselves' (Informant 10 2014 int.). Concerned over the deteriorating

Christian-Muslim relations and the lack of unity within the Muslim community, the forum's major objective was to improve inter-religious relations by informing Christians about Islam, and to work for strengthened unity among Muslims.

When the Muslim protests started in 2012, several of the forum's members soon became active in the leadership. The engagement was individually based, and as many of them already were known to the public – as preachers, young sheikhs, writers and journalists – they were soon elected to the arbitration committee. Belonging to a new young generation, they had not experienced the suppression during the Derg period and not lived through the ideological battles of the 1990s, as the senior Intellectualists had. These different experiences became evident when the latter advised the juniors to stay away from the protests. The fact that some of these younger ones had been active in the Intellectualist movement created a fear among senior leaders that this would produce unwanted attention to the Intellectualists from the government's side. Similarly important was that the new leadership belonged to a younger generation that was formed by the experiences of EPRDF rule. The paradoxical situation was that parallel to a development towards authoritarianism, the government's public rhetoric revolved around democracy, secularism, constitutional rule and development. This had an effect on the younger generation, and as such, they were in closer dialogue with the modern and 'capitalized on the increasingly democratic and participatory sensibility of the modern age' (Ayooob 2008: 6). While not actively supporting the ruling party's policies, the point to be made is that concepts such as democracy, secularism and constitutional rule were to a large extent internalised by the youth, in turn resulting in a more pronounced consciousness about their value.

The government, however, interpreted the Muslim protests as expressions of Islamic extremism aiming to overturn the political order. The state has the obvious responsibility to curb any violent movement that threatens the security of the state, the society and the individual, but the dilemma is that when such measures are directed toward so-called extremist or militant Muslim groups they often become indiscriminate – failing to sufficiently differentiate between violent and non-violent actors (Qureshi & Marsden 2010; Nasser-Edine *et al.* 2011). This has been the case in several African localities (Anderson & McKnight, 2015), and is arguably true for the Ethiopian context.

The Ethiopian government's inaccurate understanding of developments within the Muslim community – in which the phantom of



extremism was viewed as a dominating and imminent threat – seriously affected how they viewed the Muslim protests. Portraying them as ‘working to erode the age-old tradition of tolerance between traditional Sufi Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia’ (‘Briefing: Ethiopia’s Muslim Protests’, 15.11.2012),<sup>16</sup> the protesters were largely believed to be the Salafis, and it was claimed that there were ‘extremist Salafists trying to topple the state forcefully’,<sup>17</sup> and that the Salafi movement in Ethiopia even had ‘a military wing’.<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat ironic, given the fact that the Salafi movement is the one with the least developed political thinking in Ethiopia. From showing initial restraint in dealing with the protests – largely because many took place within the mosques’ compounds – the government eventually became more determined to end them. The first step was the arrest of the members of the arbitration committee in July 2012, later becoming part of a group of 29 charged with ‘plotting acts of “terrorism” in 2012 (‘Ethiopia Charges 29 Muslims under Anti-terror Law’, 29.10.2012). This was followed by a media campaign through which the government portrayed them as anti-peace elements and potential terrorists aimed at overthrowing the Ethiopian government.<sup>19</sup> The government’s final crackdown occurred on *Id al-Fitr* in August 2013, when the federal police, in a highly coordinated operation, blocked all the major streets leading out from the stadium where Muslims had gathered for prayers, and rounded up and arrested the worshippers as they were heading home. No official figures on the number of arrests are available, but eyewitnesses estimate it to be close to 10,000 – most of whom were released a week later, without any charges. The majority of the arbitration committee was in July 2015 found guilty of incitement to terrorism (‘Ethiopia: Court Passes Guilty Verdict On Ethiopian Muslim Arbitration Committee Members *et al.*’, 7.7.2015), and received in August 2015 prison sentences up to 22 years (Mahlet Fasil, 3.8.2015).<sup>20</sup>

Such policies and an increasingly constricted political space would according to the inclusion-moderation hypothesis logically produce increased radicalisation. The fact that there are no indications pointing in this direction has direct implication for the thesis itself, in turn forcing us to include and explore other factors relevant for this particular context. One dilemma with the thesis is that any measurement of a process of moderation requires an assumed radical point of departure. This is something that has not been evident in the Ethiopian case where there are no indications of any initial radical or militant expressions of Islam. It could here be suggested that this was a result of EPRDF’s early inclusive policy towards Muslims, which constitutionally secured

their rights, granted them – through the system of ethnic federalism – positions in local and regional administrations, and enhanced their opportunities (as traders) through the liberalisation of the economic sector. This buttressed Muslims' support for the government's policies in general, and augmented, in particular, the Intellectualists' commitment to democratic values and the constitutional framework. What is important here is that the reversal of this inclusive policy from the mid-1990s did not alter these attitudes. This was in spite of the fact that the limiting of operational space took place in a situation where Muslims in general and the Intellectualists in particular had high expectations of a brighter democratic future. Rather than radicalisation, the constraining environment brought a return to former 'politics of withdrawal' which entailed self-seclusion, detachment from societal engagement and a certain degree of submissiveness.

The crucial point is, however, that the continued constricting policies in the 21st century actually furthered the discourse of moderation; of deepened support for secularism, democratic values and constitutional rule. This was clearly evident in the Muslim protests, in the slogans used, in the demands forwarded and in the ideological positions of the organisers. There was nothing that suggests any development in an 'extremist' direction; no demands for the overthrow of the government, no calls for the creation of an Islamic state, and very few religious references in general. Instead, the protests were strong reactions to a policy that were seen as exceedingly intrusive, and the overarching claim was that the government had crossed the secular 'red line' by violating the constitutional separation of state and religion. The interesting point here is how the protesters took the battle into the government's courtyard, and by constantly referring to the constitution and calling for the maintenance of the secular order, they both pointed to the inconsistency in the government's policies and sought to keep it accountable for its actions. Also noticeable is the way the leaders managed to keep the protests remarkably disciplined and peaceful, something that contradicted the government's portrayal of the protests as an 'anti-peace' extremist movement.

This means that the Muslim protests became an important pedagogical tool buttressing the discourse about moderation. While they surely were a means to vent frustration, they were also crucial as an arena for learning and reflection, contributing to shaping a more elaborate thinking about secularism and about the role of Islam in relation to politics. It needs to be reiterated that this learning dovetailed with an already existing discourse that had taken place within the Intellectualist

movement. Framed within a language of human rights, giving preference to questions about religious freedom and rule of law, this discourse had a reciprocal effect on the participants in the way it created increased political consciousness, even if little concrete was achieved. The content of the slogans, speeches made by the leaders and messages posted in the social media made the protests an exercise in constitutionalism and a venue in which the value of democracy and secularism penetrated the minds of the Muslims and gained new meaning. Even if the government's actions were criticised, there was, at the same time, a growing realisation that these things were more than empty words; they actually had a real and practical content that had the potential for creating a better and freer society. As expressed by one informant: Five years ago Muslims were rarely making reference to the constitution or to democracy. When references were made, it was only in relation to our rights, meaning it was kind of opportunistic ... today, because of the demonstrations, there is greater acceptance of democracy and the constitutional system' (Informant 11 2014 int.).

Viewing the government's assertive secularism as a movement in the wrong direction where secularism appeared to be in opposition to religion, there was simultaneously a strengthened faith in secularism as the most viable – if not the only – governing principle securing the cohesion of the Ethiopian state and the well-being of its citizens. Informants were also conscious about the different types of secularism, making reference to the French and the American models. The former model was seen as too intrusive and as largely anti-religious, while the latter model was the most preferable one seen as most suitable for Ethiopia: 'Ethiopian secularism needs to consider the culture of the country. Those in power today don't understand Islam. You can't ban religion. Religion will have its manifestations, and the politicians need to secure the rights of religion' (Informant 12 2014 int.). This points to a crucial aspect of the Intellectualists' understanding of secularism as intrinsically related to religious freedom. The secular principle of religion-politics separation was primarily seen as guaranteeing religious expressions free from any state interference, while the state would be the one securing equal and fair treatment of the different religious communities. This had direct relevance for how the role of Islam in politics and the boundaries between Islam and politics were understood. There were those who argued that in order to keep Islam from becoming corrupted by worldly politics, the two had to be kept far apart: '[politics] is the anti-thesis of religion. Therefore, religious leaders should stay as far as possible away from politics' (Informant 6 2014 int.). Others

underscored, at the same time, Muslims' responsibility to engage constructively in society, participating, for instance, through the ballot box. The argument was to let Islamic virtues permeate society: 'we can work to influence the moral of society, and through that politics will be influenced' (Informant 12 2014 int.).

The support for the secular principle also had a direct bearing on the question of *shari'a* laws. Although opinions vary, the dominating view has been one which recognises the relevance of *shari'a* law, but which brackets this as a theological matter:

This is a point on which all Muslims of Ethiopia agree: *shari'a* should be the governing law [of any Muslim society]. However, this is something that is part of the *aqida* [doctrine]. There are no Muslim groups that think that this is something that can be practiced in Ethiopia. Everyone supports a secular state. (Informant 13 2014 int.)

Some also made reference to the principle of justice underpinning *shari'a* law, arguing that if this was violated, *shari'a* law rule would be meaningless: 'what this means is that implementing *shari'a* law in a context like Ethiopia would not bring justice, as there are Christians who would not feel comfortable under such a system' (Informant 4 2014 int.). Idris Muhammad, for his part, reiterated in 2014 his preference for the 'Abyssinian model' which he had introduced eight years earlier – which made it legitimate for Muslims to accept and live under a non-Muslim rule, and in this way making secularism compatible with Islam (Informant 3 2014 int.).

The protesters' commitment to a moderating discourse – in an increasingly uninviting political environment – not only counteracts the government's perceptions and claims of a growing radicalisation of Islam in Ethiopia, but also points to the fact that this moderating discourse rather was a product of ideological developments within the Muslim community.<sup>21</sup> The importance of internal discourses has also been raised by Browsers (2009) in her discussion of the inclusion-moderation thesis. Shifting the focus from organised political parties and their participation in electoral processes, and emphasising the ideological production that takes place inside and outside of parties and the role of a broader intellectual context, she underscores the important role of informal groups, individuals and networks of individuals, and points to how the complex interactions between such actors constitute powerful ideological forces (Browsers 2009: 9, 179). The Intellectualist movement as an informal social network is a highly relevant case in point for this, being open and not constricting or determining the direction of the ideological developments.

However, the movement's informal character also affected its ability to maintain any kind of ideological consistency, and consequently paved the way for a broad range of different views. This came apparent both during and after the Muslim protests, when certain senior figures were vehemently opposed to the protests as such, criticising the protests as a means of action, and arguing that they were counterproductive. Others took an opposite stand, and the result was intense debates and deep divisions among the Intellectualists as well as within the broader Muslim community.

#### CONCLUSION

The government's crackdown on the Muslim protests in recent years could possibly have driven the movement in a more 'radical' direction. The fact that this has not happened is interesting, given the fact that the government's policies have caused a high degree of anger among Muslims, where they feel as being under attack, marginalised and labelled as potential terrorists. An important reason for this is the role of the Intellectualists; their critical engagement with broader Islamic currents, their commitment to finding a fitting solution to their own local context, and their fight against religious excesses.

This highlights the importance of local religious actors themselves in countering so-called violent extremism. It also reminds us that such actors do not need to be made part of any foreign, well-intended campaign of 'winning the hearts and minds', and points to the fact that very effective CVE programmes actually are taking place in the grass-roots. This needs to be recognised in Ethiopia, where there also is an urgent need for a political process that does not further alienate the Muslim population, but that is inclusive and that acknowledges the legitimacy of their concern.

The Intellectualists' devotion to moderation while also being politically engaged points to the complexity surrounding the issue of Muslim politics. Resistant to any Islamic political order, critical of the government's policies, and supportive of the secular order and democratic process – the Intellectualist movement cannot easily be categorised under the Islamist label. Rather, it has constituted a venue for ideological negotiation and political engagement that escapes any single and overriding label. Decentred, informal and increasingly fragmented, the ideological and political discourses are not always coherent and predictable. Yet again, this is how politics is, whether it is Muslim or not.

The discourse about moderation does not exclude the possibility of an emerging religious militancy. Ethiopia is at the time of writing (September 2016) witnessing widespread – and sometimes violent – ethnic-based protests that easily could spiral out of control. It is moreover situated in a region where religious militancy is a source of instability, seen by al-Shabaab's actions in Somalia and by a growing number of religiously based violent attacks in Kenya. Inter-religious relations within Ethiopia continue to be fragile, and vague reports about militant Islamic groups have emerged.<sup>22</sup> However, the Intellectualist movement – together with other important forces – remains an important voice in the constant formation of the country's future. Eager to contribute, the Intellectualists deserve to be viewed and treated as more than uncooperative extremists, and could arguably play a constructive role as the moderating force the movement has been from its very inception.

## NOTES

1. Because of the sensitivity surrounding contemporary religious development in Ethiopia in general, and Intellectualist movement in particular, we have been forced to omit names and information about the informants.

2. It is important to make clear that there never has been, nor is there any organised Muslim Brotherhood presence in Ethiopia.

3. The main movements were the Salafi movement, the Jama'at al-Tabligh, and, what is discussed here, the Intellectualist movement. See Østebø (2008) for more details on the different movements.

4. See Østebø (2016) for a more extensive discussion of these issues.

5. It is important to note that IFSO did not have any office in Ethiopia.

6. It is important to note that WAMY also had a Muslim Brotherhood leaning.

7. Many of these magazines had a relatively short lifespan: *Bilal* came out in the period September 1993 to January 1995, while *Dawa* appeared with three issues in 1993. For more details, see Hussein (1998a, 1998b).

8. There were disagreements about this structure, some saying it was of a hierarchical nature, while others never referred to the terms *usra* and *shuba*.

9. Al-Albani was a renowned *hadith* scholar and one of the most influential thinkers within contemporary Salafism. He was ardently critical towards the Muslim Brotherhood, lamenting it for being more concerned about politics than the religious sciences and creed (*aqida*). For more details, see Lacroix (2009: 69; 2011: 86).

10. Added to this were a series of bomb attacks by the Somali al-Itihad al-Islamiyya in major Ethiopian cities from May 1995 to April 1996.

11. Staffed with individuals loyal to the government, it has consequently never earned the recognition of the Muslims.

12. The national elections in 2005 constituted a brief democratic moment, but was immediately substituted by policies that radically curtailed political opposition, civil society activities and the media. For more details on such developments, see Aalen & Tronvoll (2009) and the edited volume by Abbink & Hagmann (2013).

13. Ministry of Education: *Rules and Regulations on Religious Practices in Educational Institutions* (May 2007); Ministry of Education: *How to Prevent and Solve Religious Challenges that Occur in Educational Institutions* (November 2007).

14. For more details on these developments, see Østebø (2013a, 2013b).

15. The name al-Ahbash (Arabic) refers to the people of Ethiopia, and the explicit Ethiopian connection was embodied by Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari (1910–2006), a

religious scholar from Harar, who after fleeing Ethiopia became the long-time spiritual leader of al-Ahbash in the 1950s.

16. Another approach has been to claim that the demonstrations were staged by political opposition groups using religion as a disguise to destabilise the government. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, warned, in his acceptance speech on 21 September 2012, that he would not tolerate 'those who want to advance a political agenda behind the cover of religion' ('As Muslim Protest Resumes', 2.9.2012).

17. 'Constitutional rights for religion and the rule of law' *Aiga Forum*, 2012, <<http://aigaforum.com/articles/constitution-religion-rule.php>>, accessed 2.5.2012.

18. Yemane Nagish: 'Wahhabiya Labelled as Extremist.' *The Reporter*, 2011, <<http://thereporter-ethiopia.com/News/wahabiya-labeled-extremist.html>>, accessed 13.10.2011. See also 'If the Wahhabis Are Not Terrorists, Who Are?' (in Amharic) *Negadres*, 29.7.2011.

19. Important in this regard was the documentary *Jihadawi Harakat*. The whole documentary is available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WchwQRvV2xg>>, accessed 25.2.2013).

20. Four members were pardoned in September 2015 in connection with the Ethiopian New Year.

21. Similar observations have been forwarded by Turam (2007) and by Wegner & Pellicer (2009).

22. Such reports tend to be vague and flimsy, often producing more questions than answers. Al-Qaida groups operating in Ethiopia were said to have been uncovered in 2013 and 2014, and most recently – on 28 October 2015 – Ethiopian authorities announced they had arrested members of an Ethiopian ISIS cell; <<http://aranews.net/2015/10/ethiopia-arrests-isis-linked-cell-intending-to-announce-islamic-emirate/>>, accessed 3.11.2015).

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