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## Muslim protests raise fears of radical Islam

By Ioannis Gatsiounis - Special to The Washington Times

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South African President Jacob Zuma (left) and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles ..

KAMPALA, Uganda — Clashes between Islamic protesters and riot police over the weekend in Ethiopia have raised fears that Muslims are becoming increasingly radical in a predominantly Christian country that has been a key U.S. ally in combating terrorism in the Horn of Africa.

Muslims on Saturday blocked police from entering the Anwar Mosque in the west of the capital, Addis Ababa, a week after a mass protest at an African Union summit in the city led to 71 arrests.

Muslims accuse the government of illegally interfering in Islamic affairs by closely monitoring their activities at mosques and forcing clerics to practice Al Ahbash, an apolitical Lebanese-born sect of Islam. Ethiopia's constitution bans government meddling in religious practices.

The government accuses agents from Saudi Arabia and neighboring Sudan and Somalia of promoting Salafism and Wahhabism, which are extremist forms of Islam. In April, four Muslims were killed after police arrested an Islamic cleric accused of preaching Salafism in the town of Asasa. A month later, the government deported two Arabs of unknown origin, saying they incited violence outside Addis Ababa's largest mosque.

Ethiopia's roughly 25 million Muslims make up about 30 percent of the population and traditionally have practiced a moderate form of the faith informally associated with Sufism.

Hassan Hussein, an Ethiopian human rights activist, said continued government harassment of Muslims runs the risk of stoking calls for toppling Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government.

"The protesters know that they have the support of the majority of the population so long as their demand is for civil liberties and democratic freedoms. Other sectors could press similar demands, and it might escalate into calls for regime change as has happened in the Arab Spring," he said.

Complicating the rising tensions is the unknown health of Mr. Zenawi, who was last seen in public several weeks ago appearing thinner than usual. Communications Minister Bereket Simon last week assured journalists that Mr. Zenawi's "health condition is very good and stable," but

declined to go into specifics. Opposition websites say the prime minister is terminally ill with brain cancer.

Jawar Mohammed, an analyst on Ethiopian affairs, said information from the government on Mr. Zenawi's health and whereabouts is "conflicting and confusing."

"All indications show that he has not been in charge of the state at least for a month," Mr. Mohammed said.

"He has not been responding to the Muslim protests either. While the government claims that Meles will resume his duties soon, most people believe that the regime is just buying time for orderly succession."

Mr. Zenawi, who took power at the end of the Ethiopian Civil War in 1991 and was re-elected in 2005, has tolerated little dissent, claiming protests disrupt the country's rapid development. He has attracted strong foreign investment through low taxes and easy access to land. Economic growth has averaged more than 10 percent over the past eight years.

Critics say the regime's heavy-handedness, more than outside influence, is radicalizing Ethiopia's Muslim community.

"Heeding the demands of the protesters can resolve the issue," said Hassen Hussein, a human rights activist and assistant professor of leadership and management at St. Mary's University of Minnesota.

Muslims say their mosques are under 24-hour surveillance, their homes have been invaded, and the government forces mosque officials on them.

Christians, too, have struggled for religious freedom under Mr. Zenawi's regime, which appointed its own choice for patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Muslims also accuse the government of exaggerating the threat of Islamic extremism to receive more Western financial and logistical support to combat terrorism in the region.

Ethiopia has been a key Western ally in diminishing the al Qaeda-linked al-Shabab militant group in neighboring Somalia. Mr. Zenawi was one of just four African leaders invited to the Group of Eight meeting in May at Camp David in Maryland.