



INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MEDIATION

"Fostering a culture of peace among ethnic and religious groups"

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MEDIATION ACADEMY

Specialized Mediation Training The Mediation of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

Mediation Project

Mediation Case Study (developed by Abdurahman Omar, November 9, 2019)

A Case of Ethno-Religious Identity

What Happened? Historical Background to the Conflict

A case of ethno-religious identity is a conflict between the head of a town and a priest of an Orthodox Church. Jamal is a respected Muslim, an ethnic Oromo, and the head of a small town in Oromia region of western Ethiopia. Daniel is an Orthodox Christian, an ethnic Amhara, and a well-respected priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the same town.

Since he assumed office in 2016, Jamal is known for his efforts for the development of the town. He collaborated with many people in the society to fundraise money and build a secondary school, which the town did not have before. He has been recognized for what he did in the health and service sectors. He is praised by many business men and women for facilitating microfinance services and subsidies for small-scale business owners in the town. Although he is considered as a champion of change, he is criticized by some for giving preferential treatment to his group members - ethnic Oromos and Muslims - in various administrative, social, and business-related projects.

Daniel has been serving the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for about thirty years. As he was born in the town, he is well known for his passion, tireless service and unconditional love for Christianity and the church. After becoming a priest in 2005, he dedicated his life to the service of his church, while encouraging young Orthodox Christians to work for their church. He is the most loved priest by the younger generation. He is further known for his fight for land rights of the church. He even opened a legal case asking the government to return plots of land owned by the church that was confiscated by the previous military regime.

These two well-known persons were involved in a conflict due to the plan of Jamal's administration to build a business center in the location that, according to the priest and majority

of the Orthodox Christians, historically belongs to the Orthodox Church and known for a place for the celebration of the epiphany. Jamal ordered his administration's team to mark the area and the construction agents to start the construction of the business center. Priest Daniel made a call to fellow Orthodox Christians to protect their land and defend themselves against an attack on their religion in the name of development. Following the priest's call, a group of young Orthodox Christians removed the signs and announced that the construction of the center should stop. They protested in front of the office of the head of the town, and the demonstration turned into violence. Due to the violent conflict that erupted between the protesters and the police, two young Orthodox Christians were killed. The federal government ordered that the construction plan should stop immediately, and called both Jamal and priest Daniel to the capital for further negotiation.

Each Other's Stories — how each person understands the situation and why

Jamal's Story - Priest Daniel and his young followers are obstacles to development

Position:

Priest Daniel should stop obstructing the town's development effort. He should stop encouraging young orthodox Christians to engage in violent activities in the name of religious freedom and right. He should accept the administration's decision and collaborate for the construction of the center.

Interests:

Development: As the head of the town, I have the responsibility to develop the town. We do not have a single organized business center for proper operation of different business activities. Our market is very traditional, unorganized and inconvenient for business expansion. Our neighboring towns and cities have big business areas where buyers and sellers easily interact. We are losing potential business men and women as they are moving to big centers in neighboring towns. Our people are forced to depend on other towns for their shopping. The construction of organized business center will contribute to the growth of our town by attracting business men and women.

Employment Opportunities: The construction of a business center will not only help business owners, but also create employment opportunities for our people. The plan is to build a big business center which will create job opportunities for hundreds of men and women. This will help our young generation. This is for all of us not for a specific group of people. Our aim is to develop our town; not to attack religion.

Using Available Resources: The selected land is not owned by any institution. It is the property of the government. We are just using available resources. We selected the area because it is a very convenient place for business. It has nothing to do with religious attack. We are not targeting any religion; we are just trying to develop our town with what we have. The claim that the place belongs to the church is not supported by any legal evidence. The church never owned a specified land; they don't have document for it. Yes, they have been using the place for the celebration of the epiphany. They were practicing such religious activities in a government owned land. My administration or previous administrations had not protected this government property as we did not have any plan to use the specified land. Now, we have developed a plan to build a business center on government owned land. They can celebrate their epiphany in any available free spaces, and for the arrangement of that place we are ready to work with the church.

Priest Daniel's Story - Jamal's aim is to disempower the church, not to develop the town.

Position:

The plan is not for the benefit of the town as repeatedly stated by Jamal. It is an intentionally designed attack on our church and identity. As a responsible priest, I will not accept any attack on my church. I will never allow any construction; rather I would prefer to die fighting for my church. I will not stop calling believers to protect their church, their identity, and their property. It is not a simple issue that I can compromise on. It is rather a serious attack to destroy the historical right of the church.

Interests:

Historical Rights: We have been celebrating the epiphany at this location for centuries. Our ancestors blessed the area for the epiphany. They prayed for the blessing of water, purification of the place, and protection from any attacks. It is now our responsibility to protect our church and property. We have a historical right to the place. We know that Jamal is saying we do not have a legal paper, but thousands of people who have been celebrating the epiphany every year at this location are our legal witnesses. This land is our land! We will not allow any building in this place. Our interest is to preserve our historical right.

Religious and Ethnic Bias: We know that Jamal is helpful to Muslims, but not to us Christians. We certainly know that Jamal considered the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a church that mainly serves the Amhara ethnic group. He is an Oromo working for the Oromos and he believes that the church has nothing to offer to him. Majority of Oromos in this area are not Orthodox Christians; they are either Protestants or Muslims and he believes that he can easily mobilize others against us. We Orthodox Christians are the minority in this town and our number is decreasing every year due to forced migration to other parts of the country. We know that they are forcing us to leave the place in the name of development. We will not leave; we will rather die here. We might be considered as minority in number, but we are majority with the blessing of our God. Our main interest is to be treated equally and to fight against religious and ethnic bias. We kindly ask Jamal to leave our property for us. We know that he helped Muslims build their mosque. He gave them land to construct their mosque, but here he is trying to take our land. He never consulted us regarding the plan. We consider this as a serious hatred toward our religion and existence. We will never give up; our hope is in God.