

Ethiopian-Israeli Jews protest racism in society, policing

by [Joshua Mitnick](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Tensions over Israel's absorption of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants that have simmered for decades exploded into the open in early May, leading to dozens of injuries and more than 20 arrests.

Thousands of twentysomething African Israelis clashed with police in Tel Aviv. Protesters had gathered to denounce the beating of an Ethiopian soldier by law enforcement officers—captured on videotape—in the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon the week before.

Coming just four days after violence broke out at a similar protest in Jerusalem, the clashes escalated a national debate among Israelis about the persistent discrimination faced by a dark-skinned immigrant community once welcomed to Israel with national celebrations.

The clashes also showed an assertiveness among the now-grown children of Ethiopian immigrants, who are more integrated into Israeli society, fluent in Hebrew, and more able to press their demands for change.

“We will uproot aggressive violence among us, and fight the phenomena of racism,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in parliament, just hours after meeting with protest leaders and with Damas Pakada, the Israeli Defense Force soldier who was beaten purportedly for refusing a police demand to quickly leave an area they were clearing. “If we thought that we handled the problem sufficiently, the events of recent days show that there is a deeper problem, we need to devote more resources and more attention.”

Israeli president Reuven Rivlin acknowledged in a statement the “raw wound” exposed by the Ethiopian immigrant protests. “It’s the pain of a community crying out over a sense of discrimination, racism, and of being unanswered,” he said. “We must look directly at this open wound.”

Israeli and Diaspora Jews once celebrated the airlifts of the late 20th century that brought the Ethiopians to Israel.

The mass immigration of African Jews also served as a symbolic rebuttal to pro-Palestinian critics who equated Zionism with racism. Today some 130,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel, about 2 percent of the population.

The Ethiopians were settled in blighted neighborhoods with high concentrations of fellow immigrants, and the community has grappled with unofficial segregation in schools. Decades later, poverty rates are high among Ethiopians, and college matriculation is low compared with the general Jewish population in Israel.

“Our parents didn’t understand the language; they would come to us for help,” said Taranah Bogaleh, a 22-year-old gas station attendant, adding that he fears the police and has suffered harassment outside his family home. “All of this has been held deep inside of our hearts.”

The video of the beating resonated deeply among Ethiopian-Israeli Jews who expect to have the same opportunities as the rest of Israeli society.

“The young people have shown their cry and roar that this is our country too,” said Fentahun Assefa-Dawit, director of Tabeka, an advocacy organization, who met with Netanyahu after the protests. “Most of these young people have served in the army, in elite units, and are hopeful that they will become equal citizens with rights just like everyone else.”

As they peacefully blocked Tel Aviv’s main highway for two hours on May 3, the Ethiopian Israelis chanted soccer cheers, sported Ethiopian and Israeli flags, and held crossed fists over their heads like civil rights protesters in the United States.

“White, black, we’re all humans,” they chanted. Hours later in Rabin Square the confrontation escalated, and clashes broke out, with police using stun grenades, water cannons, and teargas.

Among the demonstrators were many Ethiopian youths who spoke about police harassment, poor education, and hiring discrimination.

“In areas where the community is concentrated, there is overpolicing: the trend is to stop every minor, perform a search, and in most cases it’s just a pedestrian,” said Netanella Mashasha, a 32-year-old Ethiopian Israeli, as she walked with the demonstrators. “A lot of times they use Taser guns on these youths. There’s a trigger finger with these youths.”

Moshe, a secret service guard from northern Israel, said he feels he has to prove he is better than other Israelis because of the color of his skin. The demonstration shows “that we are not going to be quiet like our parents,” he said.

Michaal Samuel, an Ethiopian immigrant to Israel who runs a nonprofit focusing on education, said the young generation of Ethiopian Israelis grew up in poor neighborhoods watching their parents struggle and expected a different future.

“If you finish university, you should find a nice job, with a good salary,” she said. “But my friends change their names [from Amharic to Hebrew] to get called back for interviews.”

Yet response by the Israeli public to the demonstrations has been positive, she said.

“Israeli society is saying, ‘You are right,’” she said. “But I say, it’s not about just our community, it’s about the Israeli society. It’s not my problem, this is our problem.”

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