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2018 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: SUDAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religious creed and the rights to worship, assemble, and maintain places of worship. Some laws and government practices are based on the government's interpretation of a sharia system of jurisprudence, which human rights groups state does not provide protections for some religious minorities, including minority Muslim groups. The law criminalizes apostasy, blasphemy, conversion from Islam to another religion, and questioning or criticizing the Quran, the Sahaba (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet. While the law does not specifically address proselytizing, the government has criminally defined and prosecuted proselytizing as a form of apostasy. According to international reports, on October 13, a group of security agents raided the private home of Tajedin Yousif in South Darfur and arrested 13 Christian men who were participating in a series of prayer meetings. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports stated that of the 13 persons arrested, 10 were of Darfuri origin and converts from Islam. The reports said the individuals were abused in detention, threatened with apostasy charges, and forced to denounce Christianity. Authorities released the detainees within two weeks and dropped the charges against them. Human rights groups continued to accuse the government of interfering in internal religious community disputes over the sale of church lands to investors, including on cases related to the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) and the Sudan Church of Christ (SCOC), and to highlight the inability of these Christian groups to seek legal recourse. According to church leaders, authorities continued to influence the internal affairs of churches through intimidation, harassment, and arrests of those opposed to government interference within evangelical Christian churches. In February authorities demolished a church belonging to the SCOC in the Haj Youssef neighborhood of Khartoum North and confiscated the property of the church, including Bibles and pews. As of year's end, the government had not provided compensation for the damage nor provided an alternative space for worshipping, according to church leaders. While the law does not prohibit the practice of Shia Islam, authorities took actions against Shia Muslims. Some Shia Muslims reported authorities continued to prevent them from publishing articles about Shia beliefs. According to multiple sources, authorities again regularly charged and convicted Christian and Muslim women with "indecent dress" for wearing pants and fined and lashed them. The Ministry of Education for Khartoum State continued to mandate that Christian schools operate on Sundays in order to meet minimum required instruction hours.

Muslims and non-Muslims said a small and sometimes vocal minority of Salafist groups that advocated violence continued to be a concern. Some Christian leaders noted the lack of representation of minority religious groups within government offices and the lack of a strong Council of Churches to advocate for the legal rights of churches and their members.

In high-level discussions with the government, U.S. officials encouraged respect for religious freedom and the protection of minority religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy officials raised specific cases of demolitions of houses of worship and court cases against religious leaders with government officials, including officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They also emphasized the government's need to take concrete steps to improve religious. Embassy officials stressed that respect for religious freedom is crucial to improved relations with the United States and a precursor to peace in the country. In meetings with the minister of foreign affairs, the Charge d'Affaires raised the denial of licenses for new churches, the demolition of houses of worship without an alternative, the harassment of Muslim religious minorities, government interference in internal church affairs, and enforcement of "indecent dress" laws. The embassy maintained close contact with religious leaders, faith-based groups, and NGOs, and embassy representatives monitored and attended many of the legal proceedings for those prosecuted in connection with their religious beliefs. In May the embassy cohosted a workshop on interreligious dialogue with the Canadian embassy in Khartoum and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his opening remarks, the Charge d'Affaires stressed the importance of leaders from different faith

backgrounds and professions ensuring that their laws and actions are in line with international guiding principles of religious freedom.

Since 1999, Sudan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated Sudan as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the restriction in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the Government of Sudan, currently set forth in section 7042(i) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 (Div. K, P. L. 115-141), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 43.1 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the Sudanese government, approximately 97 percent of the population is Muslim. It is unclear whether government estimates include South Sudanese (predominantly Christian or animist) who did not leave after the 2011 separation of South Sudan or returned after conflict erupted in South Sudan in 2013, or other non-South Sudanese, non-Muslim groups. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports more than 927,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, including 768,819 South Sudanese refugees. Some religious advocacy groups estimate non-Muslims make up more than 20 percent of the population.

Almost all Muslims are Sunni, although there are significant distinctions among followers of different Sunni traditions, particularly among Sufi orders. Small Shia Muslim communities are based predominantly in Khartoum. At least one Jewish family remains in the Khartoum area.

The government reports the presence of 36 Christian denominations in the country. Christians reside throughout the country, primarily in major cities such as Khartoum, Port Sudan, Kassala, Gedaref, El Obeid, and El Fasher. Christians also are concentrated in some parts of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile State.

Relatively small but long-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians are located in Khartoum, El Obeid in North Kordofan, River Nile and Gezira States, and eastern parts of the country. Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, largely made up of refugees and migrants, are located in Khartoum and the eastern part of the country. Other larger Christian groups include the Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Anglican Church, Sudan Church of Christ, Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and Presbyterian Church of the Sudan. Smaller Christian groups include the Africa Inland Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Sudan Interior Church, Sudan Pentecostal Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Government statistics indicate less than 1 percent of the population, primarily in Blue Nile and South Kordofan States, adheres to traditional African religious beliefs. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of these traditional beliefs into their religious practice. A small Baha’i community primarily operates underground.

SECTION II. STATUS OF GOVERNMENT RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Legal Framework

The Interim National Constitution, passed in 2004, provides for freedom of religious creed and worship, and grants individuals the right to declare their religious beliefs and manifest them through worship, education, practice, or performance, subject to requirements of laws and public order. The constitution prohibits the coercion of individuals to adopt a faith they do not believe in or to engage in rites or services without consent. The

constitution also states that nationally enacted legislation shall be based on sharia. The government has not amended the constitution to reflect the 2011 independence of South Sudan.

The law does not permit Shia Muslims to hold worship services; however, they are allowed to enter Sunni mosques to pray.

The constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain humanitarian and charitable institutions, acquire property and materials related to their religious rites and customs, write and disseminate religious publications, teach religion, solicit public and private contributions, select their own leaders, observe days of rest, celebrate religious holidays, and communicate with constituents on matters of religion.

The constitution denies recognition to any political party that discriminates based on religion and specifically prohibits religious discrimination against candidates for the national civil service. Constitutional violations of freedom of religion may be pursued in the Constitutional Court; however, cases of discrimination often originate and are addressed in lower courts.

National laws are based on a sharia system of jurisprudence. The criminal code states the law, including at the state and local level, shall be based on sharia sources and include hudood, qisas, and diyah principles (specific serious crimes and related restitution and punishment). The criminal code takes into consideration multiple sharia schools of jurisprudence (madhahib). The Islamic Panel of Scholars and Preachers (Fiqh Council) determines under which conditions a particular school of thought will apply. Other criminal and civil laws, including public order laws, are determined at the state and local level.

The president appoints the Fiqh Council, an official body of 40 Muslim religious scholars responsible for explaining and interpreting Islamic jurisprudence, to four-year renewable terms. The council advises the government and issues fatwas on religious matters, including levying customs duties on the importation of religious materials, payment of interest on loans for public infrastructure, and determination of government-allotted annual leave for Islamic holidays. The council's opinions are not legally binding. Muslim religious scholars may present differing religious and political viewpoints in public.

The criminal code does not explicitly mention proselytizing, but it criminalizes both conversion from Islam to any other faith (apostasy) and acts that encourage conversion from Islam. Those who convert from Islam to another religion as well as any Muslim who questions or criticizes the teachings of the Quran, the Sahaba (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet may also be considered guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death. Those charged with apostasy are allowed to repent within a period decided by the court but may still face up to five years in prison. The law does not prohibit individuals from converting to Islam from another religion.

The criminal code's section on "religious offenses" criminalizes various acts committed against any religion. These include insulting religion, blasphemy, disturbing places of worship, and trespassing upon places of burial. The criminal code states, "whoever insults any religion, their rights or beliefs or sanctifications or seeks to excite feelings of contempt and disrespect against the believers thereof" shall be punished with up to six months in prison, flogging of up to 40 lashes, and/or a fine. The article includes provisions that prescribe penalties of up to five years' imprisonment and 40 lashes for any non-Muslim who curses the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, or members of his respective households.

The Ministry of Guidance and Endowments (MGE) regulated Islamic religious practice, including activities such as reviewing Friday sermons at mosques, supervised churches, and was responsible for guaranteeing equal treatment for all religious groups. The MGE also provided recommendations to relevant ministries regarding religious issues government ministries encounter. In September President Omar al-Bashir dissolved the previous government and established a restructured government that eliminated the MGE. The next month Bashir created a Higher Council for Guidance and Endowments (HCGE) and appointed the former minister of the MGE to be the council's chairperson. The HCGE maintains the same mandate as the former ministry.

In October the government formed a new interagency committee to discuss religious coexistence and religious issues more broadly with a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs chairing the committee and members from the security services, HCGE, Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Education, and other bodies.

To gain official recognition by the government, religious groups must register at the state level with the HCGE, or a related ministry such as the Ministry of Culture, or the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), depending on the nature of the group and its activities. The HAC oversees NGOs and nonprofit organizations. Religious groups that also engage in humanitarian or development activities must register as nonprofit NGOs by filing a standard application required by the HAC for both local and international NGOs. Only religious groups that register are eligible to apply for other administrative benefits, including land ownership, tax exemptions, and work permits.

The law does not permit Shia Muslims to hold worship services; however, they are allowed to enter Sunni mosques to pray.

The state-mandated education curriculum requires that all students receive religious instruction. The curriculum further mandates that all schools, including international schools and private schools operated by Christian groups, provide Islamic education classes to Muslim students, from preschool through the second year of university. The law does not require non-Muslims to attend Islamic education classes, and it mandates that public schools provide Christian students with other religious instruction if there are at least 15 Christian students in a class. According to the Ministry of Education, following the separation of South Sudan, this number was not reached in most schools. Non-Muslim students therefore normally attend religious study classes of their own religion outside of regular school hours to fulfill the religious instruction requirement.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for determining the religious education curriculum. According to the ministry, the Islamic curriculum must follow the Sunni tradition.

The HCGE determines, along with the state-level entities responsible for land grants and planning, whether to provide authorization or permits to build new houses of worship, taking into account zoning concerns such as the distance between religious institutions and population density (the allocation of land to religious entities is determined at the state level). The HCGE is mandated to assist both mosques and churches in obtaining tax exemptions and duty-free permits to import items such as furniture and religious items for houses of worship; the HCGE also assists visitors attending meetings sponsored by religious groups and activities to obtain tourist visas through the Ministry of Interior. The HCGE coordinates travel for the Hajj and Umra.

Public order laws, based largely on the government's interpretation of sharia, vary by state. These laws prohibit "indecent" dress and other "offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality." Authorities primarily enforce such laws in large cities and enforce laws governing indecent dress against both Muslims and non-Muslims. The criminal code states that an act is contrary to public decency if it violates another person's modesty. In practice, the special Public Order Police and courts, which derive their authority from the Ministry of Interior, have wide latitude in interpreting what dress or behaviors are indecent and in arresting and passing sentence on accused offenders.

Some aspects of the criminal code specify punishments for Muslims based on government interpretation of sharia punishment principles. For example, the criminal code stipulates 40 lashes for a Muslim who drinks, possesses, or sells alcohol; no punishment is prescribed for a non-Muslim who drinks or possesses alcohol in private. The criminal code stipulates if a non-Muslim is arrested for public drinking, or possessing or selling alcohol, he or she is subject to trial, but the punishment will not be based on hudood principles. The penalty for adultery with a married person is hanging and for an unmarried person is 100 lashes. An unmarried man could additionally be punished with expatriation for up to one year. These penalties apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Adultery is defined as sexual activity outside of marriage, prior to marriage, or in a marriage that is determined to be void.

Under the law, the justice minister may release any prisoner who memorizes the Quran during his or her prison term. The release requires a recommendation for parole from the prison's director general, a religious committee composed of the Sudan Scholars Organization, and members of the Fiqh Council, which consults with the MGE to ensure decisions, comply with Islamic legal regulations.

Under the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman (although most Sudanese sharia schools of thought advise that the non-Muslim women must be "people of the book," i.e., either Christian or Jewish). A Muslim woman, however, legally may marry only a Muslim man. A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man could be charged with adultery.

Separate family courts exist for Muslims and non-Muslims to address personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, according to their religion. By law, in custody dispute cases where one parent is

Muslim and the other is Christian, courts grant custody to the Muslim parent if there is any concern that the non-Muslim parent would raise the child in a religion other than Islam.

According to Islamic personal status laws, Christians (including children) may not inherit assets from a Muslim.

Government offices and businesses are closed on Friday for prayers and follow an Islamic workweek of Sunday to Thursday. The law requires employers to give Christian employees two hours off on Sundays for religious activity. Leave from work is also granted to celebrate Orthodox Christmas, an official state holiday, along with several key Islamic holidays.

An interministerial committee, which includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), and in some cases Military Intelligence, must approve foreign clergy and other foreigners seeking a residency permit.

The constitution's bill of rights says all rights and freedoms enshrined in international human rights treaties, covenants, and instruments ratified by the country are integral parts of the constitution's bill of rights.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to international reports, on October 13, a group of security agents raided the private home of Tajedin Yousifa, a Christian pastor, in South Darfur and arrested 13 Christian men who were there for a series of prayer meetings. Of those arrested, reports stated 10 were of Darfuri origin and converts from Islam. NISS was reportedly monitoring the home and had two pickup trucks parked outside the home. NISS agents reportedly took the individuals to an unknown NISS facility in Nyala, where they were interrogated. NISS then transferred the detainees to a Nyala police station on October 18. Authorities initially charged the men with disturbing public peace but released 12 of the detainees on October 21 with no charges. All detainees were reportedly in poor health upon release and required medical attention for injuries sustained in police detention. Authorities kept the pastor in detention for additional questioning. Initial reports indicated that authorities also charged him with apostasy and crimes against the state, which carry a death sentence if convicted. Authorities released the pastor on October 23 and dropped all charges. Authorities stated they also considered the group to be supporters of the leader of an armed Darfuri rebel movement.

In August the Omdurman Criminal Court convicted Samson Hamad Al-Haras, a member of the government-backed Presbyterian Evangelical Community Committee (ECC), of murder in the killing of SPEC elder Yonan Abdullah during an April 2017 altercation between ECC supporters and opponents within SPEC over control of the SPEC-operated Omdurman Evangelical Church School. Al-Haras was sentenced to death. The other 60 or more SPEC leaders arrested in opposition to the ECC's efforts to sell the school remained in various stages of prosecution.

On December 28, government security forces fired tear gas and stun grenades at a group of 300-400 worshippers leaving a mosque associated with the opposition National Umma Party in Omdurman following Friday prayers. The incident occurred on the 10th day of antigovernment demonstrations and protests of rising food prices, and activists had urged protesters to gather in large numbers following Friday prayers.

According to reports, the Public Order Police frequently charged women with "indecent dress" and "indecent behavior," and there were numerous court convictions. Religious leaders and government officials again reported the Public Order Police fined and lashed Muslim and Christian women on a daily basis in Khartoum for wearing pants and other dress the police considered indecent. In November the Public Order Police arrested a Coptic singer after she performed at a concert for which the organizer had not received the proper permit. The police searched the singer's private phone while she was in custody and charged her with indecent behavior because of photographs they found on her phone. A judge convicted her and sentenced her to 10 lashes and a fine of 5,000 Sudanese pounds (\$110). Authorities lashed her immediately following the conviction.

Minority religious groups, including Muslim minority groups and especially Shia Muslims, expressed concern they could be convicted of apostasy if they expressed beliefs or discussed religious practices that differed from those of the Sunni majority group. Some Shia reported they remained prohibited from writing articles about their

beliefs and religious issues remained a redline for news media to address. Many individuals from Muslim minorities, such as Shia or Quranist groups, reported that their places of worship had remained closed since 2014. According to lawyers working on the Quranists' issues, the Constitutional Court dismissed the court case against them due to mounting international pressure and ordered that the group not gather again. The lawyers also stated the Quranists needed to keep a low profile regarding their places of worship, as well as religious events and gatherings.

SPEC leaders continued to face lengthy and prolonged trials for charges including "criminal mischief" and "trespassing," after they continued to use properties belonging to the SPEC.

In early July, the Pentecostal Cultural Centre, located in downtown Khartoum opposite Unity Catholic School, reopened. The government had closed the center in 2014 and temporarily turned it into a NISS office after the government claimed the church did not have legal documentation proving ownership of the building.

In September an Omdurman court ruled the SCOC national leadership committee led by Moderator Ayoub Tilliano had ownership of the SCOC headquarters in Omdurman. The leadership committee was engaged in a legal case over ownership of the property following a 2015 raid by security forces on SCOC headquarters, after which the security forces confiscated all their legal documents and brought charges against the leadership council for trespassing. The committee received the legal documents back from security services on September 24.

Government security services were reported to continue to monitor mosques closely for Friday sermon content. Multiple sources stated authorities provided talking points and required imams to use them in their sermons. If an imam's sermon diverged from the government-provided talking points, the imam would be removed from his position. Some individuals from minority religious groups expressed concern that the Friday sermons encouraged discriminatory or hateful beliefs against the minority groups.

Prisons provided prayer spaces for Muslims, but sources stated that authorities did not allow Shia prayers. Shia prisoners were permitted to join prayer services led by Sunni imams. Some prisons, such as the Women's Prison in Omdurman, had dedicated areas for Christian observance. Christian clergy held services in prisons, but access was irregular.

The government continued to state it did not have non-Muslim teachers available to teach Christian courses in public schools. Some public schools excused non-Muslims from Islamic education classes. Some private schools, including Christian schools, received government-provided Muslim teachers to teach Islamic subjects, but non-Muslim students were not required to attend those classes. Most Christian students attended religious education classes at their churches based on the availability of volunteer teachers from their own church communities. Their families reported that the children's schools did not usually recognize the classes, and students in those cases did not receive credit.

On February 11, authorities demolished the SPEC church in the Haj Youssef neighborhood of Khartoum North. Police arrived at the scene following Sunday worship services and ordered congregants to vacate the premises immediately. Police then confiscated the property inside the church, including the pews and Bibles, and razed the building with a bulldozer. Church leaders said they had no advance warning of the demolition. The church had already been seized by a local businessman, who claimed ownership of the church despite ownership deeds in the name of the church dating back to 1989. At year's end, the church was engaged in an appeal of the decision and the confiscation of the church's property, but authorities repeatedly postponed court sessions. At year's end, church leaders had yet to receive compensation for damages or been given an alternative site for worship.

In May a Muslim human rights lawyer fled the country after he was arrested and interrogated by security services for his work advocating for minority religious groups. He had already faced repeated incidents of harassment and intimidation from NISS, including two break-ins of his home the previous year. Human rights activists expressed concern about the departure of the lawyer from their community, as he was a vocal proponent of religious freedom and worked to defend the rights of religious minorities.

According to various church representatives, the government continued to favor mosques over churches in the issuance of permits for houses of worship. Some churches reported they were less willing to apply for land permits or to construct churches given the government's previous repeated denials. The government attributed its denial of permits to the churches not meeting government population density parameters and zoning plans.

Local parishioners reported that, compared to Islamic institutions, Christian places of worship continued to be disproportionately affected by zoning changes, closures, and demolitions. The government said places of worship that were demolished or closed lacked proper land permits or institutional registration and that mosques, churches, schools, hospitals, and residences were all affected equally by the urban planning projects. Sources estimated at least 24 churches, Christian schools, libraries, and cultural centers were “systematically closed,” demolished or confiscated by the government between 2011 and 2017. During the year, only one church demolition was reported. Government authorities also stated that mosques were affected and provided photographs of mosque demolitions; however, lack of detailed information on the alleged demolitions made it difficult to verify the information, according to observers.

The NISS noted the locations of churches and mosques it was tracking that were located on what the government referred to as “unplanned areas” in Khartoum State. Christian leaders and lawyers said that gaining outright land titles remained very difficult given that the government legally owned all land, and thus the legal status of churches remained unclear.

During the year, 22 churches filed complaints with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) following an outreach campaign to Christian religious communities in the Khartoum area by the NHRC. Most of the complaints related to land and administrative issues. At year’s end, the commission was following up with the complaints and established a working group to investigate systematic issues related to the registration of and land permits for Christian places of worship.

Following a July 2017 order from the Ministry of Education for Khartoum State mandating that schools (except for Coptic schools) operate from Sunday to Thursday, non-Coptic Christian schools either continued to operate on Sundays to adhere to the national general education guidelines, or they increased instruction hours on other school days to avoid operating on Sundays. Multiple members of the government, including the foreign affairs minister and the minister of education for Khartoum State, continued to publicly express concern that the order would damage the country’s international reputation and unnecessarily impeded individuals’ religious freedom. Government officials stated, however, that they were unaware of how to overturn the order because its origins were unclear.

The government continued to restrict some religiously based political parties, including the Republican Brothers Party, which opposes the government’s use of sharia as a source of law. The Political Parties Affairs Council, which oversees the registration of political parties, refused to register the party in 2014, and the party’s leader filed an appeal of the decision to the Constitutional Court in 2015, but the court refused the appeal. A local community center and library associated with the party in Omdurman remained closed due to government restrictions on its operation.

Government officials continued to state Islamic principles should inform official policies and often pointed to sharia as the basis for the country’s legal framework. President Bashir and other senior figures frequently emphasized the country’s Islamic foundation. In a February speech responding to public opposition to subsidy cuts and a currency devaluation, Bashir said that anyone who protested the economic situation or his administration’s policies was an enemy of Islam and working against the Islamic faith.

The government denied Christian churches or their humanitarian institutions tax-exempt status, although the government granted this status to Muslim relief agencies. Christian churches reported authorities required them to pay or negotiate taxes on items such as vehicles.

The government continued to restrict non-Muslim religious groups from operating or entering the country and continued to monitor activities and censor material published by religious institutions. The MGE and the HCGE again said they had granted a limited number of Christian missionary groups permission to engage in humanitarian activities and promote Muslim-Christian cooperation.

Many officials from various churches reported the government refused to grant, or delayed renewing, work and residency visas to church employees of foreign origin, including missionaries and clergy, or to individuals the government believed would proselytize in public places. Local members of the Catholic Church said these denials had a particularly negative impact on the Catholic Church, whose clergy are mostly of foreign origin, while most clergy of other Christian denominations are ethnically Sudanese or South Sudanese. The government

only granted residence permits with less than a year's validity. The government required clergy to pay a fine of 70 Sudanese pounds (\$1) for every day they were not in residency status.

The government reportedly closely scrutinized those suspected of proselytizing and used administrative rationales, or other aspects of the law such as immigration status, to either deport or exert financial pressure on such individuals.

Some religious groups reported the government barred the import of unapproved religious texts and said most Christian denominations were unable to import teaching materials and religious texts as guaranteed by the constitution. According to international reports, in September authorities released two shipping containers with Arabic-language Bibles destined for the Bible Society in Khartoum after they had been detained in Port Sudan for three years.

A small number of Christian politicians, the majority of whom were members of the Coptic Church, continued to hold seats in the government.

During the year, Christian groups called for a Christian director of the MGE Office of Church Affairs. MGE officials said they agreed to appoint a Christian but had yet to do so because Christian communities could not agree on a representative. Christian groups said the government never expressed a willingness to appoint a Christian, although government officials publicly stated such willingness on multiple occasions. After the government dissolved the MGE and established the HCGE, the opportunities for non-Muslim representation were not clear.

In January the government convened a group of representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former MGE, Inter-Religious Council, Ministry of Education, and others to discuss the state of religious coexistence. The group identified several areas of concern, including religious education inequities, and resolved to establish an intragovernmental working group on religious coexistence. In October the government formed a new higher-level interministerial group chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the same structure and mandate.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Individual Muslims and Christians reported generally good relationships at the societal level and stated that instances of intolerance or discrimination by individuals or nongovernmental entities were generally isolated.

The Sudan Inter-Religious Council, a registered nonprofit, nonpolitical organization consisting of scholars, half of whom were Muslim and the other half Christian, was mandated by its constitution to advise the MGE/HCGE and to encourage interfaith dialogue.

A segment about gender equality in the country on the Deutsche Welle's (DW) Arabic-language talk show "Shabab Talk" went viral on September 21. During the segment, a young woman, Weam Shawky, addressed Mohammed Osman Saleh, the chair of the Sudan Scholars Association, and criticized the widespread harassment and intimidation of women because of their clothing. Immediately following the episode, Saleh gave a press conference in which he said the show was put on by "enemies of our culture." Muslim clerics responded by calling for protests and violence against DW's production partner, television channel Sudania 24, in Khartoum. Several Muslim clerics decried the show in their Friday sermons, and one cleric accused the host, Jaafar Abdul Karim, of "spreading atheism." Many human rights activists and other members of the local community defended the show and praised Sudania 24 for initiating an open discussion on the topic of women's rights and the public order system.

SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

In meetings between the Charge d’Affaires and the minister of foreign affairs and the ministry’s director for human rights, women, and children, the Charge promoted religious freedom as a means of achieving peace and stability. He emphasized that religious freedom formed a key basis for broader normalization of bilateral relations. The Charge and other embassy officials also made this point repeatedly in regular meetings of the Joint Review Committee of the U.S.-Sudan engagement plan. The Charge further emphasized that persons of different religions needed to be able to practice their religious beliefs freely and that creating an environment without fear of harassment based on religion was crucial to bringing peace and stability to the country’s conflict areas. He also raised the issues of the denial of licenses for new churches, demolition of houses of worship without an alternative, court cases against religious leaders, harassment of Muslim religious minorities, government interference in internal church affairs, and enforcement of “indecent dress” laws.

The embassy held a weeklong series of meetings in May on religious freedom with civil society representatives, religious leaders, and journalists. In the meetings, embassy officials raised religious freedom issues regarding property ownership, access to education and school days conflicting with Christian worship services, and women’s rights.

The U.S. embassy partnered with the Canadian embassy in Khartoum and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hold a two-day workshop in May on interreligious dialogue. Senior government officials, leaders of religious communities, diplomatic representatives, media, and nongovernmental organizations attended the workshop and shared their views on the state of religious freedom in the country. The main topics discussed were education laws, laws governing religious freedom, and registration of religious properties. An official from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom attended the workshop and met with government representatives, including Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour. The official discussed ways the government could take concrete steps toward substantially improving the state of religious freedom in the country.

Embassy officials met regularly with imams and Sufi clerics, and clergy and parishioners of Catholic and Protestant churches to hear their views on the religious freedom situation. Embassy officials attended religious ceremonies of different groups and underscored in regular meetings with leaders of Muslim and Christian groups the importance of religious tolerance. U.S. government representatives closely monitored the legal proceedings concerning religious organizations and religious leaders.

The embassy regularly utilized its social media outlets to share articles and messaging related to religious tolerance and freedom.

Since 1999, Sudan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated Sudan as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the restriction in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the Government of Sudan, currently set forth in section 7042(i) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 (Div. K, P. L. 115-141), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.