

2018 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: SOUTH SUDAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transitional constitution stipulates separation of religion and state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides religious groups freedom to worship and assemble, organize themselves, teach, own property, receive financial contributions, communicate and issue publications on religious matters, and establish charitable institutions. Both government and opposition forces reportedly engaged in attacks on religious buildings and killings of religious workers. On May 16, government forces attacked Emmanuel Christian College in Yei, killing at least 10 persons, five of them children.

On May 12, attackers killed a local pastor and his wife in a home invasion in Juba. On July 23, a protest by a group of youths demanding employment turned violent in Maban, and the rioters attacked and destroyed the compounds of several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including those of several missionary groups. The country's religious institutions reportedly remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations provided shelter from the fighting. Sources said that at times their generally outspoken attitude toward what they stated were the forces driving the conflict made them targets, similar to humanitarian workers.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with religious leaders and civil society organizations.

SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.2 million (July 2018 estimate). The majority of the population is Christian. The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report from 2010 estimated Christians make up 60 percent of the population, indigenous religious followers 33 percent, and Muslims 6 percent. Other religious groups with small populations include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. The country's massive population displacement resulting from the long-running conflict and large percentage of pastoralists who regularly migrate within and between countries make it difficult to estimate the overall population and its religious demography accurately.

According to the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and the government Bureau of Religious Affairs, the groups that make up the majority of Christians are the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and African Inland Churches. Smaller populations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. Many of those who adhere to indigenous religious beliefs reside in isolated parts of the country; a substantial part of the population in these areas also combines Christian and indigenous practices.

SECTION II. STATUS OF GOVERNMENT RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Legal Framework

The transitional constitution stipulates separation of religion and state. It prohibits religious discrimination, even if the president declares a state of emergency. It states that all religions are to be treated equally and that religion should not be used for divisive purposes.

The transitional constitution provides for the right of religious groups to worship or assemble freely in connection with any religion or belief, solicit and receive voluntary financial contributions, own property for religious purposes, and establish places of worship. The transitional constitution also provides religious groups the freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications; communicate with individuals and communities on matters of religion at both the national and international levels; teach religion in places “suitable” for this purpose; train, appoint, elect, or designate by succession their religious leaders; and observe religious holidays.

The government requires religious groups to register with the state government where they operate and the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (because most religious groups are also advocacy and humanitarian/development organizations). Faith-based organizations are required to provide their constitution; a statement of faith documenting their doctrines, beliefs, objectives, and holy book; a list of executive members; and a registration fee of \$3,500 (which is charged for all organizations, including faith-based ones). This requirement, however, is not strictly enforced, and many churches operate without registration. International faith-based organizations are required also to provide a copy of a previous registration with another government and a letter from the international organization commissioning its activities in the country.

The transitional constitution specifies the regulation of religious matters within each state is the executive and legislative responsibility of the state government. It establishes the responsibility of government at all levels to protect monuments and places of religious importance from destruction or desecration.

The transitional constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain “appropriate” faith-based charitable or humanitarian institutions.

The transitional constitution guarantees every citizen access to education without discrimination based on religion.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were continued reports that in connection with the civil conflict, security forces, opposition forces, and armed militias affiliated with the government and the opposition committed killings and other abuses of civilians, including religious aid workers and churchgoers. On May 16, at least 10 persons were killed when government forces attacked Emmanuel Christian College in Yei; the motive for the attack remained unclear.

Both a Christian representative and a Muslim representative read prayers at most official events, with the government often providing translation from English to Arabic.

Several religious groups were represented in government positions. President Kiir Mayardit, a Catholic, employed a high-level advisor on religious affairs, Sheikh Juma Saaed Ali, a leader of the Islamic community in the country. Additional Muslim representation in government included at least one governor and 14 members of the 400-member Transitional National Legislative Assembly. All principal religious groups were represented in the assembly.

Although not mandated by the government, religious education was generally included in public secondary school and university curricula. Theoretically, students could attend either a Christian or an Islamic course, and those with no religious affiliation could choose between the two courses. Because of resource constraints, however, some schools offered only one course. Christian and Muslim private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government interference.

SECTION III. STATUS OF SOCIETAL RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

On May 12, unknown gunmen killed a local pastor and his wife in a home invasion in Juba. Police later arrested three suspects, but there was no information on their motives or the status of the case. A protest by a group of youths demanding employment at a UN High Commission for Refugees compound in Maban turned violent, and rioters attacked and destroyed the compounds of several NGOs, including those of several missionary groups.

The country's religious institutions reportedly remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country. Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. Sources said that at times their generally outspoken attitude toward what they stated were the forces driving the conflict made them targets, similar to humanitarian workers.

The SSCC, in implementing its Action Plan for Peace, held a series of community-level dialogues throughout the country aimed at facilitating mutual understanding and respect among various groups, including religious groups. According to observers, the dialogues were well received and enjoyed wide participation among various faiths and ethnic groups. The SSCC and the Islamic Council served as hubs for coordination of the peacebuilding events. Churches were often used as shelters for those seeking to escape violence. For example, St. Mary's Cathedral in Wau continued to shelter more than 5,000 residents fleeing intense fighting in the area.

Religious leaders worked together across denominations to advance peace. Christian and Muslim leaders expressed their willingness to assist with the peacebuilding process. Pope Francis called for a day of fasting and prayer for peace in South Sudan in February, and many other religious leaders joined him, including Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. The Vatican announced it would open an embassy in South Sudan in 2019.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, including peace celebrations in Juba.

SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly participated in discussions in Juba with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, SSCC, Episcopal Church of Sudan, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and Catholic Church on faith-based peace initiatives, implementation of the peace agreement signed in September, and religious tolerance. Embassy officials expressed concern to faith-based leaders and the government regarding conflict-related violence and its impact on religious workers.