



USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Sudan

Executive Summary

The transitional constitution provides for 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. In June, the Episcopal Church in Central Equatoria State stated publicly the South Sudanese People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) detained five persons during a church service in Loka, Central Equatoria State, and later killed them while in custody. In a separate incident in June, the government ordered an investigation into claims the SSPDF killed four worshippers during a church service in Lainya, Central Equatoria State. In January, government officials detained two Episcopal bishops at Bor airport in Jonglei State who were reportedly linked to a continuing dispute within the Episcopal Church of South Sudan (ECSS). Government officials stated they detained the visiting bishops, as they believed their presence would aggravate tensions. Officials later returned the bishops to Juba and released them. Catholic bishops released a September 15 public statement criticizing the government for its inability to guarantee law and order, and for failing to implement fully the 2018 peace agreement.

Media reported a number of attacks on clerics, including the killing in August of three persons, including two nuns, in an ambush on the Juba-Nimule road, and the shooting in April of the Roman Catholic Bishop-designate of Rumbek, who survived the attack. At year's end, the motives for the attacks remained unclear and the perpetrators unidentified. The country's religious institutions remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country, according to researchers and international NGOs. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations frequently provided noncombatants shelter from subnational conflicts throughout the country.

U.S. embassy officials raised concerns with government representatives regarding a lack of rule of law, increasing subnational conflict, impunity for violent crimes, and reports of human rights abuses and their impact on religious workers. The U.S. Charge d'Affaires and other embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with religious leaders and civil society organizations, including an interfaith event for religious leaders in September.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (midyear 2021). The 2020 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report estimated that Christians make up 60.5 percent of the population; followers of indigenous (animist) religions, 32.9 percent; and Muslims, 6.2 percent. Other religious groups with small populations include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. The country's massive population displacement resulting from nearly a decade of conflict, as well as a large population of pastoralists who regularly migrate within and between countries, make it difficult to accurately estimate the overall population and its religious demography.

According to the South Sudan Council of Churches and the government Bureau of Religious Affairs, the principal Christian denominations are Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and African Inland Churches. Smaller congregations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. Adherents of indigenous religious traditions reside throughout the country and practice their indigenous religions alongside Christianity and Islam.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The transitional constitution stipulates the 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. Religious groups with associated advocacy and humanitarian or development organizations must also register with the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. 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 all humanitarian organizations must pay, 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 that 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

In June, the Episcopal Church in Central Equatoria made a public statement declaring that the SSPDF detained five persons during a church service in Loka, Central Equatoria State, and later killed them while in custody. In a separate incident in June, the government ordered an investigation into claims the SSPDF killed four worshippers during a church service in Lainya, Central Equatoria State. The SSPDF denied responsibility for the killings.

In January, government officials detained the Episcopal Bishops of Kongor and Wanglei Dioceses at Bor airport in Jonglei State. Officials later returned them to Juba by government vehicle and released them. Media coverage and other sources stated the incident was linked to a continuing dispute within the ECSS in Jonglei where local populations clashed with each other and the church’s hierarchy after the defrocking of an Episcopal bishop. Government officials stated they detained the visiting bishops because they believed their presence would aggravate tensions.

On November 2, military intelligence officials in Yei reportedly summoned the former Presbyterian Bishop of Yei, Jackson Yemba Antipas, following his late October release from the custody of security forces in Yei. These officials ordered him not to leave Yei and told him to remove a social media post complaining of arbitrary detention. Later that month, Bishop Yemba retired from his clerical post; civil society representatives said that he did not resign under duress, however. Military intelligence officials previously arrested the bishop and three other persons in August for alleged participation in the People’s Coalition for Civil Action calls for popular protests on August 30.

Following the killing of three persons, including two nuns, in August along the Juba-Nimule road, the South Sudan Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat released a September 15 pastoral letter criticizing the government for its inability to guarantee law and order and for not fully implementing the 2018 peace agreement.

Religious leaders said they generally had good access to government officials and that their relationship with authorities remained broadly positive. Both Christian and Islamic prayers were given to open most official events, with the government often providing translation from English to Arabic. Religious leaders expressed concern the continued breakdown in law and order increased the risk of harm to all entities operating in the country.

In June, the former mayor of Juba, Kalisto Lado, destroyed shrines associated with indigenous religious practices. In September, media reported that police arrested 11 persons who were subsequently

charged with practicing witchcraft. Despite these charges, legal experts said that since the country is a secular state, there were no legal grounds to charge persons with witchcraft.

Government officials included both Christians and Muslims. President Kiir Mayardit, a Catholic, employed Sheikh Juma Saeed Ali, a leader of the country's Islamic community, as a high-level advisor on religious affairs. One of the Vice Presidents, Hussein Abdelbaghi, was also a Muslim.

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 Islamic private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government mandates on content. Seventh-day Adventists noted the University of Juba often failed to provide reasonable accommodation for Adventist students unable to take exams on Saturdays.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 16, unidentified gunmen killed three persons, including two nuns, in an ambush on the Juba-Nimule road, which connects the capital to Uganda. By year's end, neither government forces nor opposition militias claimed responsibility for the deaths, with both parties accusing the other of culpability. According to media reports, in April, unidentified gunmen broke into the home of the Italian-born Roman Catholic Bishop-designate of Rumbek, shot him in both legs, and fled. He was subsequently transferred to Nairobi, Kenya for medical treatment. At year's end, the motives for the attacks remained unclear and the perpetrators unidentified.

The country's religious institutions remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country, according to researchers and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peace building, humanitarian aid, and COVID-19. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations frequently provided noncombatants shelter from various subnational conflicts throughout the country. Observers said that at times, religious workers became targets for speaking out about what they believed to be the underlying causes of the conflict. One religious leader said security forces wanted to close a radio station affiliated with a Christian denomination for its criticism of the government, a course of action that was averted after appealing to President Kiir.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, and both Christian and Muslim leaders were represented on key peace agreement implementation bodies that met throughout the year. Additionally, the lay Catholic organization Sant'Egidio formally supported the implementation of the peace agreement and engaged with nonsignatories.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised concerns with government representatives regarding a lack of rule of law, increasing subnational conflict, impunity for violent crimes, and reports of human rights abuses and

their impact on religious workers. They also expressed these concerns to religious leaders. The Charge d’Affaires raised the detention of Bishop Yemba with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in September.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials regularly participated in discussions with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, South Sudan Council of Churches, Episcopal Church of South Sudan, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and Catholic Church on faith-based peace initiatives, implementation of the peace agreement signed in 2018, and religious tolerance. In September, the embassy hosted an interfaith event for Christian and Muslim leaders, highlighting its support for the role religious leaders play in peace-building and reconciliation.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of
Origin and Asylum Research and
Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041
Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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