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2016 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 freely, organize themselves, teach, own property, receive financial contributions, communicate and issue publications on religious matters, and establish charitable institutions.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. Religious and civil society leaders as well as government officials stated the country had a tolerant, interfaith society, despite the ongoing fighting between government and opposition forces throughout the country.

U.S. embassy officials met with Advisor on Religious Affairs Sheikh Tahir Bior in November to discuss the context of religious tolerance and freedom. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.5 million (July 2016 estimate). The majority of the population is Christian. Studies from the early 2000s estimated Muslims constituted between 18 and 35 percent of the population, but many believe the number of Muslims declined through migration to Sudan after South Sudanese independence in 2011. The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report from 2010 estimated Christians make up 60.5 percent of the population, indigenous religions 32.9 percent, and Muslims 6.2 percent. Other religious groups with small populations include the Bahai Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism.

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 Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior Church, Presbyterian Evangelical, and the African Inland Church. Smaller populations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. A substantial part of the population in isolated parts of the country adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or 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 in matters of religion at both the national and international levels; teach religion in places "suitable" for these purposes; 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 and with the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). There were reports the ministry changed the requirements for registration during the year, but details were not available as of year's end. Previously, faith-based organizations were

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 \$100 for national or \$200 for international faith-based organizations. International faith-based organizations were required also to provide a copy of a previous registration with another government and a letter from the international organization commissioning its activities in South Sudan.

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

On May 15, Sister Veronika Rackova, a Slovakian missionary working as a doctor at the St. Bakhita's Medical Center in the southern town of Yei, was shot in the stomach while driving an ambulance with a patient. According to news sources, she died from her wounds after being airlifted to Kenya for surgery. Members of the military reportedly shot her at a checkpoint. Government authorities arrested three soldiers in connection with the shooting, the motive for which remained unclear.

Media sources reported some religious institutions were looted as government and opposition forces continued fighting throughout the country, and as criminality increased. For example, in late October media sources reported armed men wearing military uniforms forcibly entered the Good Shepherd Peace Center, established by the Catholic Church to provide a place for peacebuilding and trauma healing, and robbed religious workers at gunpoint.

The Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation, an interreligious body formed by President Salva Kiir Mayardit in April 2013 with the support of donor funds, closed during the year in anticipation that it would be merged into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission is envisaged in the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (the peace agreement). At year's-end, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission had not yet been established.

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, a Catholic, employed a high-level advisor on religious affairs, Tahir Bior Ajak, 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 (TNLA). There are no reserved seats for religious groups in the TNLA; however, all principal religious groups were represented.

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 only offered education in one course. Christian and Muslim private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government interference.

Although the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs had not released information regarding new registration policies, no religious groups reported problems with registering or with operating as an unregistered religious group.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to U.S. Christian news sources, arsonists set on fire the Sudanese Church of Christ worship building in the refugee settlement of Yida on January 16, and the fire reportedly burned both the exterior and interior and destroyed all chairs, a pulpit, and copies of Arabic Bibles. The news sources reported authorities arrested four Muslim suspects. One of the accused reportedly said they were "sent from Sudan to attack churches and aid workers helping Nuba Christians from Sudan."

Government officials and religious leaders, including the advisor on religious affairs, reported a high degree of respect for religious freedom in the country. The advisor stated individuals worshiped freely and reported no religiously motivated attacks. Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. The SSCC, in implementing its Action Plan for Peace, held a series of community-level dialogues aimed at facilitating mutual understanding and respect among various groups, including religious 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 sheltered 1,000 residents after people fled intense fighting in the town in June.

Religious leaders worked together across denominations to advance peace. For example, in October the archbishops of the Catholic and Episcopal Churches and the leader of the Presbyterian Church in South Sudan traveled to Rome at the invitation of the pope to discuss the political crisis in the country. Catholic Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of the Archdiocese of Juba said their visit focused on how to bring the ongoing fighting to an end. According to a spokesperson for the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), the visit brought a renewed energy to the faith-based community's efforts.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, including the opening of the National Assembly and Independence Day ceremonies. The Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission of the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan was established with two faith-based leaders, one Christian and one Muslim, and charged with monitoring the ceasefire.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with Advisor on Religious Affairs Sheikh Tahir Bior in November to discuss the preservation of religious tolerance and freedom in the face of renewed conflict. The U.S. Ambassador regularly participated in discussions in Juba with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, the South Sudan Council of Churches, the Episcopal Church of Sudan, the Presbyterian Church, and the Catholic Church.