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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - South Sudan

Executive Summary

The transitional constitution (TC) 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. Local officials in Jonglei state demolished a church that was involved in a land dispute.

Christian and Muslim leaders regularly consulted with each other and stated the country had a tolerant, interfaith society.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. Embassy officials discussed the importance of religious communities in the country and their positive role in the peace process.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12 million (July 2015 estimate). The majority is Christian. There are no reliable statistics on the number of Muslims or other religious minorities. 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.

According to the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and the government's 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, Bahai, 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 TC stipulates separation of religion and state. It prohibits religious discrimination, even if the president declares a state of emergency, and states "all religions shall be treated equally" and "religion or religious beliefs shall not be used for divisive purposes."

The TC 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 TC 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 national Bureau of Religious Affairs. In order to register, "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 \$100 for national or \$200 for international faith based organizations. International faith based organizations must also provide a copy of a previous registration with another government and a letter from the international organization commissioning its activities in South Sudan.

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

The TC guarantees every citizen access to education without discrimination based on religion. Students can attend either a Christian, Islamic, or African religious course; those with no religious affiliation can choose among courses, which will cover aspects of each faith. Christian and Muslim private religious schools may set their own religious curriculum without government interference.

Government Practices

According to media reports, local officials in Jonglei State ordered the demolition of an Anglican church in November following a county court judge’s determination the land was owned by someone else. Local officials told the press they gave advance notice to relocate the church before it was destroyed. Church officials rejected that claim, saying they were awaiting a second hearing with a high court judge – to challenge the county court’s decision on the grounds it did not have statutory authority to hear a land dispute – when the demolition order was approved without their knowledge or attendance. After its destruction, church administrators began an appeal, which was pending a hearing with the high court as of the end of the year. Members had not rebuilt the church and met outdoors for services.

Discussions continued between the South Sudan Islamic Council, the central coordinating body for Islamic groups in the country, and Central Equatorial State officials regarding whether state officials would provide compensation in the form of new land to replace three demolished mosques. Prior to independence, Sudanese soldiers built the mosques on government land; the state demolished them in the years after independence.

President Salva Kiir Mayardit held an iftar and the government donated food to Muslim communities in need of food for Eid celebrations. Both a Christian representative and a Muslim representative read prayers at most official events, with the government often providing translation from English to Arabic.

In August SSCC, representing the country’s combined religious leadership, was one of the signatories to an Intergovernmental Authority on Development-brokered peace agreement following 20 months of civil conflict. The agreement was incorporated into the transitional constitution and did not affect existing guarantees of religious freedom.

In September the Ministry of Education launched a new national curriculum – approved in the summer by the Council of Ministers – for expected nationwide introduction in 2017. The curriculum included a compulsory, three times-per-week religious education program through primary and secondary school. In December the Ministry of Education’s deputy director of curriculum said the formal religious education was included in the new national curriculum to replace existing, non-uniform religious instruction and to avoid improvisation that might lead to extremist indoctrination. According to the official, religious instruction will be based on two building blocks: spiritual understanding, so students might better appreciate the key messages and values of religion, and a range of studies, so students become familiar with the key rituals and practices of their own religion.

Muslims in government included at least one governor and, through December, 14 members of the 296-member National Legislative Assembly.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to a *Morning Star News* report, on February 18, a Muslim group in Northern Bahr el Ghazal State released a Sudanese pastor after three months’ detention. The pastor stated the group had abducted and mistreated him because of his proselytizing among Muslims and his attempts to establish a church in the area. There were no local reports about this incident.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly discussed opportunities for achieving appropriate and fair representation of both faiths in the government. Religious groups of all faiths stated the country had a tolerant, interfaith society.

On October 14, members of Da’esh (Islamic State in Iraq and Levant) kidnapped and beheaded a South Sudanese citizen in Libya “to avenge the persecution of Muslims.” Following the release of a video showing the beheading, local Islamic leaders challenged the persecution claim and denounced the act in the press. The secretary general of the Islamic Council reported no incidents of discrimination or harassment toward Muslims because of the incident.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, including the opening of the National Assembly and Independence Day ceremonies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy representatives held discussions with government officials about the importance of religious freedom in the country.

The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan hosted multiple roundtable 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 to discuss their role in peace and reconciliation following decades of conflict.