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USDOS – US Department of State

2019 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. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reported incidents of government forces targeting religious communities.

As noted in a recent report by the U.S. Institute for Peace, the country’s network of religious groups 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 religious workers’ generally outspoken attitude toward what they stated were the forces driving the conflict made them targets.

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 10.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The majority of the population is Christian. The 2010 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report estimated that 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 nearly a decade of conflict, as well as a large population 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 principal Christian denominations are 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 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 and the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (because most religious groups also have associated 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 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 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

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reported incidents of government forces targeting religious communities during the year.

Both Christian and Muslim prayers are given to open 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 Sheikh Juma Saeed Ali, a leader of the country’s Islamic community, as a high-level advisor on religious affairs. Additional Muslim representation in government included at least one governor and 14 members of the 400-member Transitional National Legislative 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 Islamic private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government interference.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to U.S. Institute of Peace and others, 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 religious workers’ generally outspoken attitudes concerning the country’s political climate and long-running conflict made them targets.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, and both Christian and Muslim leaders were represented on key peace agreement implementation bodies, which met throughout the year. Additionally, the lay Catholic organization Sant’Egidio was informally supporting peace agreement implementation and conducting engagement with nonsignatories.

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 2018, and religious tolerance. Embassy officials expressed concern to faith-based leaders and the government regarding conflict-related violence and its impact on religious workers.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2019)

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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 (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583 F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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