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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sudan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2019 constitutional declaration includes several provisions protecting the right to freedom of religious belief and worship “in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order.” As stipulated in the declaration, existing laws and institutions governing religion are to remain in effect while the government works to amend and restructure them. The 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), which was integrated into the 2019 constitutional declaration, includes provisions to respect and promote religious freedom and an agreement to establish a National Commission for Religious Freedom. While the previous constitution stated all national legislation should be based on sharia, the 2019 constitutional declaration makes no reference to sharia. After a military takeover in October 2021, the December 2022 Framework Political Agreement (FPA) outlined a process for a return to civilian rule and an overhaul of the security sector and contained a commitment for the government to support and protect religious freedom.

In April, fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). As the conflict spread across the country during the year, civilian casualties, population displacement, and destruction of property, including places of worship, ensued. The government’s commitments to protecting religious freedom contained in the 2019 constitutional declaration, the JPA, and the FPA remained unimplemented. Both the SAF and the RSF attacked religious places, including mosques, churches, and religious communities, through targeted assaults and reports of indiscriminate shelling.

On May 14, Christian advocacy organization CSW (formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide) reported the Al Zareeba Mosque in El Geneina, West Darfur, was the target of an aerial strike that killed 280 persons and wounded more than 160 others. The Africa Center for Justice and Peace Studies, expressing concern regarding increasing SAF and RSF violations of freedom of worship, reported in July that 16 mosques were partially destroyed, four churches were raided and looted, and worshippers were denied entry and/or forced to convert to Islam since the outbreak of armed conflict. The report also cited deaths and injuries to worshippers. MorningStar News reported that SAF forces shelled a Sudanese Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) in Omdurman on November 1, leaving the building in ruins and destroying everything inside, including Bibles and prayer books. MorningStar News also reported shelling on November 3 of the Mariam Home building in Al-Shajjara belonging to the Comboni Catholic missionary order that resulted in injury to five nuns and several children.

Following the outbreak of conflict in April, individuals, religious leaders, and local media stressed the impact of the conflict on local civilians, including the inability to attend services, prayer meetings, or other gatherings due to frequent attacks on churches and mosques, and increased shelling and destruction of houses of worship. Local news and human rights organizations stated they believed the RSF and allied militias targeted churches specifically due to the belief that they possessed gold and other valuables.

Embassy officials began the year organizing a “religious freedom iftar” bringing together more than 70 individuals of various faiths to promote religious diversity and freedoms. Following this event, embassy officials stressed in subsequent meetings the importance of identifying measures to advance religious tolerance, such as laws that promote religious tolerance and outreach campaigns among the various religious groups. After the fighting broke out in April and the embassy suspended local operations and relocated staff to neighboring countries, embassy officials engaged with religious leaders, faith-based groups, and civil society organizations, including SPEC, the Sudan Council of Churches, the Evangelical Church of Bahri, and the Catholic Archbishop of

Khartoum, to discuss ways to end the conflict between RSF and SAF, facilitate humanitarian access to those in need, and return to a civilian government that protects religious freedom.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 49.2 million (midyear 2023). The Pew Research Center's 2020 data estimated that 91 percent of the population was Muslim, 5.4 percent Christian, 2.8 percent followed indigenous religions, and the remainder followed other religions or were unaffiliated. Some religious advocacy groups estimate non-Muslims constitute more than 13 percent of the population. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated there were approximately 1.15 million refugees and asylum seekers in the country prior to the April 15 outbreak of fighting, including 808,336 South Sudanese refugees. Post-April 15, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated approximately 188,000 refugees and asylum seekers remain in the country, 155,000 of whom identify as South Sudanese.

Almost all Muslims in the country identify as Sunni, although there are significant distinctions among followers of different Sunni traditions, particularly among Sufi orders. Small Shia Muslim communities are based predominantly in Khartoum. The Jewish community is statistically small in the Khartoum area with most having sought shelter in surrounding communities since the conflict began in April. There is a small Baha'i community.

The Sudan Council of Churches reports the presence of 36 Christian denominations, of which 24 are registered denominations. Christians are resident throughout the country, primarily in major cities such as Khartoum, Port Sudan, Kassala, Gedaref, El Obeid, and El Fasher. Christians also are concentrated in some parts of the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan State, and in parts of Blue Nile State. Due to the intensity of the current conflict, many Christian families, Muslim families, and those adhering to other faiths were internally displaced or forced to seek refuge outside of Sudan.

Relatively small but long-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians are in Khartoum, El Obeid in North Kordofan, River Nile State, Gezira State, and eastern parts of the country. Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, largely consisting of refugees and migrants, are in Khartoum and the eastern part of the country. Other larger Christian groups include the Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Anglican Church, Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC), SPEC, and the Presbyterian Church of Sudan. Smaller Christian groups include the Africa Inland Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Sudan Interior Church, Sudan Pentecostal Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Government statistics indicate less than 1 percent of the population, primarily in Blue Nile and South Kordofan States, adhere to traditional African religious beliefs. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of these traditional beliefs into their religious practices.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The 2019 constitutional declaration included several provisions protecting the right to freedom of religious belief and worship "in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order." As

stipulated in that constitutional declaration, existing laws and institutions governing religion were to remain in effect while the government worked to amend and restructure them. In 2020, the civilian-led transitional government (CLTG) then in power signed the JPA, which included provisions to respect and promote religious freedom, and specifically an agreement to establish a National Commission for Religious Freedom to address the issues of religious diversity in the country; the JPA was incorporated into and amended the 2019 constitution. Following the October 2021 military takeover, authorities maintained the laws put in place by the CLTG but ceased work on amendments. The December 2022 FPA outlined a process for a return to civilian rule and the integration of the RSF and allied militias into the SAF, and it contained a commitment for the government to support and protect religious freedom.

The previous constitution stated all national legislation should be based on sharia. The 2019 constitutional declaration, however, makes no reference to sharia, although the clause restricting the death penalty allows exceptions as sharia-sanctioned (*hudud*) punishment for certain crimes.

The 2019 constitutional declaration also stipulates access to education regardless of the student's religion. In similar fashion, political parties should not discriminate against members and prospective members on the basis of religion. The constitutional declaration also stipulates all "ethnic and cultural" groups have the right to "exercise their beliefs" and "observe their religions or customs ... in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order."

Abuses of freedom of religion are often addressed in lower courts but may, in theory, be appealed to the Constitutional Court. As of year's end, however, the Constitutional Court had not been established.

National laws adopted during the Bashir administration, which ended in 2019, concerning personal and family matters of Muslims remain largely in effect and are based on a sharia system of jurisprudence. The criminal code states that the law, including at the state and local levels, shall be based on sharia sources and include *hudud*, *qisas*, and *diyah* principles (regarding punishment, restitution, and compensation for specific serious crimes). The criminal code takes into consideration multiple sharia schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*). The Islamic Panel of Scholars and Preachers (Fiqh Council), an official body of 50 Muslim religious scholars responsible for explaining and interpreting Islamic jurisprudence, determines under which conditions a particular school of thought applies. Other criminal and civil laws are determined at the state and local level.

Members of the Fiqh Council serve four-year renewable terms. In the past, the council advised the government and issued fatwas on religious matters, including the levy of customs duties on the importation of religious materials, payment of interest on loans for public infrastructure, and determination of government-allotted annual leave for Islamic holidays. The council's opinions are not legally binding. Muslim religious scholars may present differing religious and political viewpoints in public. The scope of the Fiqh Council mandate was unclear under the CLTG and remains so following the military takeover and outbreak of war in April.

In 2020, the CLTG ratified the Miscellaneous Amendments Act (MAA), rescinding a provision of the law that criminalized and imposed the death penalty for apostasy (renunciation of Islam or conversion from Islam to another faith). The MAA replaced the apostasy provision with an article criminalizing *takfir* (the act of declaring someone a kafir, or nonbeliever). Those charged with *takfir* face imprisonment not to exceed 10 years, a fine, or both.

The criminal code's section on "religious offenses" criminalizes various acts committed against any religion. These include insulting religion, or blasphemy; questioning or criticizing the Quran, the Sahaba (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet; disturbing places of worship; and trespassing upon burial places. Regarding blasphemy, the criminal code states, "Whoever insults any religion, its rights or beliefs or sanctifications, or seeks to excite feelings of contempt and disrespect against the believers thereof shall be punished with up to six months in prison and/or a fine." The article includes provisions that prescribe penalties of up to five years' imprisonment, a fine, or both for anyone who curses the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, or members of his respective households.

Some parts of the criminal code specify punishments for Muslims based on government interpretation of sharia punishment principles. For example, the penalties for adultery are as follows: a married person is subject to hanging, an unmarried person may receive 100 lashes. Punishment for an unmarried man may additionally include banishment for up to one year. These penalties only apply to Muslims. Adultery is defined as sexual activity outside of marriage, prior to marriage, or in a marriage that is determined to be void.

Under the law, the Minister of Justice may release any prisoner who memorizes the Quran during his or her prison term. The release requires a recommendation for parole from the prison's director general, a religious committee composed of the Sudan Scholars Organization, and members of the Fiqh Council, which consults with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) to ensure decisions comply with Islamic jurisprudence.

The MRA is responsible for regulating Islamic religious practice, supervising churches, and guaranteeing equal treatment for all religious groups. The MRA also provides recommendations to relevant ministries regarding religious issues that government ministries encounter.

To gain official recognition by the government, religious groups are required to register at the state level with the MRA. The MRA and the state-level entities responsible for land grants and planning may authorize permits to build new houses of worship, taking into account zoning concerns. Allocation of land to religious entities is determined at the state level.

The Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) oversees nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofit organizations. Religious groups that engage in humanitarian or development activities must register as nonprofit NGOs by filing a standard application required by the HAC. Only NGOs registered with the HAC are eligible to apply for other administrative benefits, including land ownership, tax exemptions, and work permits. The HAC works with the Ministry of Interior to facilitate the visa process for NGO representatives seeking to obtain visas.

The MRA has federal entities in each state that coordinate travel for the Hajj and Umrah.

The nationally mandated education curriculum requires that all students receive religious instruction from elementary school to secondary school. The curriculum further mandates that all schools, including international schools and private schools operated by Christian groups, provide Islamic education classes to Muslim students from preschool through the second year of university. The law does not require non-Muslims to attend Islamic education classes and mandates that public schools provide Christian students with other religious instruction if there are at least 15 Christian students in a class. Non-Muslim students normally attend religious study classes of their own religion outside of regular school hours to fulfill the religious instruction requirement. The Ministry of Education is responsible for determining the religious education curriculum. According to the ministry, the Islamic curriculum must follow the Sunni tradition.

Under the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman. In practice, Muslim men follow sharia guidance, which advises they may marry "non-Muslim women of the book," i.e., either Christian or Jewish women. A Muslim woman, however, legally may marry only a Muslim man. A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man may be charged with adultery.

There are separate family courts for Muslims and non-Muslims to address personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, according to their religion. By law, in custody dispute cases where one parent is Muslim and the other is Christian, courts grant custody to the Muslim parent if there is any concern the non-Muslim parent would raise the child in a religion other than Islam.

According to Islamic personal status laws, Christians (including children) may not inherit assets from a Muslim. Children of mixed (e.g., Muslim-Christian) marriages are considered Muslim and may inherit assets.

Government offices and businesses are closed on Friday for prayers and follow a Sunday to Thursday work week. A 2019 decree mandates that academic institutions shall not give examinations on Sunday and authorizes Christians to leave work at 10 a.m. on Sunday for religious activities. Individuals may also leave work to celebrate Orthodox Christmas, an official state holiday, along with several key Islamic holidays.

An interministerial committee, which includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Intelligence Service, and, in some cases, the military intelligence service, must approve foreign clergy and other foreigners seeking a residency permit.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Fighting broke out in the country between the SAF and the RSF on April 15 and raged throughout the country through the end of the year. Although violence impacted nearly every state in Sudan, the Darfur, Kordofan, Gezira, and Khartoum capital regions witnessed the bulk of the fighting. As the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, respectively, SAF Commander General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and RSF Commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (aka, “Hemedti”) took power in a military coup in 2021 and served as de facto senior leaders of the government since October 2021 after overthrowing civilian Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok and upending the country’s democratic transition. The outbreak of hostilities, which pitted the SAF in direct conflict with the RSF, has caused thousands of casualties, displacement of millions of persons both internally and into neighboring countries, as well as widespread destruction of property and a humanitarian crisis. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other observers, as of year’s end, the fighting across the country between the RSF and SAF killed more than 13,000 persons, forced more than 1.4 million to flee to neighboring countries, internally displaced more than seven million persons, and destroyed many public buildings, including places of worship. The government commitments to protect religious freedom, contained in the 2022 FPA remained unimplemented.

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Following the April 15 onset of the conflict, numerous reports emerged regarding SAF elements’ conducting indiscriminate aerial bombardments, artillery strikes, and ground attacks on places of worship, leaving worshippers injured and buildings destroyed. On April 24, local news reported two rockets struck the grounds of the Our Lady Mary Queen of Africa Roman Catholic Cathedral in El-Obeid, North Kordofan, destroying parts of the clergy’s residence and the cathedral’s main gate. On April 17, according to media reports, the RSF raided and occupied All Saints Cathedral and an Anglican church in the El Amarat district in Khartoum. On April 28, the Gerief Bible School in West Gerief was bombed, destroying the worship auditorium and student dorms.

On May 14, the Al Zareeba Mosque was attacked by an aerial strike in El Geneina, West Darfur, according to CSW, killing 280 persons and wounding more than 160 others.

The Africa Center for Justice and Peace Studies stated on July 19 that 16 mosques were partially destroyed, four churches were raided and looted, and worshippers were denied entry and/or forced to convert to Islam since the outbreak of armed conflict. Mosques throughout the capital region, including in the Alzhra, South Alshabia, Alengaz “Mayo”, Tibat Alhamda, Aleizbah, East Aljerif, Shamat and Alhaj Yousef neighborhoods were affected. SAF aircraft bombed both the Azhari and Bur’i al-Dereisa mosques in Khartoum on May 13, according to RSF’s X (formerly known as Twitter) account and Radio Dabanga. According to a May 27 SAF media statement, the RSF attacked the Imam Abd Al-Rahma Mosque on May 25, attempting to loot vehicles and injuring several worshippers. Civil society reported the SAF bombed a Tijanniyah mosque in Omdurman on July 2.

MorningStar News reported SAF forces shelled a SPEC church in Omdurman on November 1, leaving the building in ruins and destroying everything inside, including Bibles and prayer books. MorningStar News also reported shelling of the Mariam Home building in Al-Shajara belonging to the Comboni Catholic missionary order on November 3 that resulted in injury to five nuns and several children. It was not clear at the time of the report whether the SAF or the RSF had targeted the building.

Some observers expressed concern that the RSF and SAF targeted church buildings deliberately in the belief it would be easier for them to acquire the property on which the buildings were located if the buildings were destroyed. Others expressed concern that political actors were taking advantage of the conflict to displace Christian communities.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

In March, an Anglican leader stated a young woman was facing heightened verbal and psychological harassment from family members and work colleagues since discovering she had been baptized in February, after having converted four years previously. The Anglican leader also reported recurring harassment by police, forcing congregants to move their worship sessions. Other Christians reported job discrimination based on their religion.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

On November 21, police arrested SPEC Pastor Abdulla Haroun Sulieman in al-Hasahisa locality in Gezira State. According to a statement from the National Religious Freedoms Association, Pastor Sulieman was charged with witchcraft for leading a prayer meeting that allegedly healed his mother, who suffered from an infection. Local media reported on November 30 that “Muslim extremists” persuaded police to arrest Pastor Sulieman for claiming to be a witch doctor. Authorities released Pastor Suleiman prior to the outbreak of the April conflict with no charges filed against him.

On April 3, CSW reported SAF soldier Yasin Ahmed Haroun was arrested and expected to appear before Al Galabat Criminal Court on April 13 on charges related to the December 2022 burning of Dawka Church, a SCOC congregation in El Gedaref State. He was charged under the section of law on defiling and disturbing places of worship and criminal mischief. According to local media and CSW, Haroun was seen running from the church to a military base following the incident.

Prisons provided prayer spaces for Muslims, but observers said authorities did not allow Shia prayers. Shia prisoners were permitted to join prayer services led by Sunni imams. Some prisons, such as the Women’s Prison in Omdurman, had dedicated areas for Christian observance. Christian clergy held services in prisons, but access was irregular, according to SCOC and Roman Catholic clergy.

Members of minority religious groups continued to express concerns regarding the educational system, which lacked sufficient teachers equipped to teach courses on Christianity and textbooks that promoted religious diversity. Although the law does not require non-Muslims to attend Islamic education classes, some schools did not excuse non-Muslim students from these classes. Some private schools, including Christian schools, received government-provided teachers to teach Islamic subjects, but non-Muslim students were not required to attend those classes. Most Christian students attended religious education classes at their churches, based on the availability of volunteer teachers from their church communities. Despite the legal requirement to provide Christian religious education in schools with at least 15 Christian students in a class, the government did not always provide sufficient resources to carry out this provision or to hire the requisite number of teachers overall. According to the Ministry of Education, the required number of teachers was not reached in most schools. Former Minister of Religious Affairs Nasreldeen Mohammed stated the lack of religious education courses for non-Muslims was still a major concern following his tenure. Mohammed said he intended to work with the Ministry of Education to address this problem and they agreed to create approximately 300 positions for Christian teachers, but he said this plan was

interrupted because of the 2021 military takeover and the April 15 outbreak of war. According to Archbishop Kondo, most schools were required to separate by gender, compelling schools to offer twice as many classes with already stretched resources, particularly for religion courses.

Leaders of religious institutions said they needed to formally request permission to import items such as vehicles into the country, but that these items continued to be tax exempt. While some church officials encountered obstacles requesting visas and resident permits for foreign Christian missionaries, the officials stated they did not face difficulties regarding tax-exempt status.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

According to Amnesty International, approximately 12 RSF members attacked Mar Girgis (St. George) Coptic Church in Omdurman on May 13. RSF members shot and injured five members of the clergy and stole large sums of money and a gold cross. They insulted church leaders and warned them to convert to Islam. They threatened and insulted those present and demanded to know where the orphan girls were, referring to the inhabitants of an orphanage on the compound. Witnesses to the attack said they believed the RSF intended to sexually assault the young women, who managed to hide during the attack. RSF attackers also used threatening and insulting language when they addressed the congregation gathered in the church complex, referring to them as “Egyptian dogs” and demanding that they leave Sudan.

CSW reported that on May 14, the RSF forcibly evacuated all priests, including Bishop Elia, the Bishop of Khartoum and South Sudan, from the Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Khartoum in order to use the premises as a military base. The RSF had reportedly intimidated and harassed those in the church for a week before they forced them to leave. A similar incident occurred at a Coptic Church in Bahri on May 3. The National Religious Freedom Association and Archbishop Kondo released a statement on May 15 condemning the use of places of worship as military bases.

Local media sources reported the RSF stormed an Episcopal church in Khartoum on May 16 to use it as a strategic base. On May 22, RSF broke into the Mar Mina Coptic Church in Omdurman. On July 12, Bishop Yonathan Hamad stated the RSF attacked and raided the Sudanese Church of Christ in Bahri.

On August 1, local media circulated a video on social media showing RSF members attacking and threatening Coptic Christians and pressuring them to convert to Islam.

In early May, RSF elements took control of the Shambat region of Bahri, including the Shambat Mosque. The RSF converted the mosque into barracks for their troops in addition to an ammunition warehouse, preventing worshippers access to services at the mosque. On September 25, sources stated that following months of RSF banning persons from performing prayers, worshippers at Shambat Mosque in Bahri were able to resume worshipping.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Following the outbreak of conflict in April, individuals, religious leaders, and local media stressed the impact of the conflict on local civilians, including the inability to practice their faith due to frequent attacks on churches and mosques, and increased shelling and destruction of worship buildings. Local news and human rights organizations reported the RSF and allied militias targeted churches, specifically, in the belief they possessed gold and other valuables.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, U.S. embassy officials met regularly with government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom and the protection of minority religious groups. On April 22, following the outbreak of fighting earlier in the month, the U.S. embassy suspended operations in Sudan. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, embassy officials began the year organizing a religious freedom iftar, bringing together more than 70 individuals of various faiths to promote religious diversity and freedom. Following this event, embassy officials stressed in a variety of meetings, gatherings, and events the importance of identifying measures to advance religious tolerance among the country's various communities and religious groups.

Prior to the outbreak of conflict, embassy officials encouraged political leaders in charge of drafting political initiatives to include language that addressed religious freedom. In numerous meetings, embassy officials advocated for freedom of religious belief, freedom of expression, and inclusion of all religious groups throughout the political discussions following the signing of the December 2022 FPA. They also urged officials to refrain from continuing the former regime's abuses of religious freedom, which included confiscating and demolishing church property, and urged local lower-level courts to adhere to the provisions of the 2019 constitutional declaration and the MAA.

Since the conflict, the U.S. Government, the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan, the African Union, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, in conjunction with the international community, have worked to facilitate formal talks with the aim of stopping the war, facilitating unfettered humanitarian access, and chartering a new process to establish civilian governance and resume a democratic transition. Through virtual and in-person meetings in the region, embassy officials continued to engage with religious leaders, faith-based groups, human rights advocates, and other civil society actors, including SPEC, the Sudan Council of Churches, the Evangelical Church of Bahri, and the Catholic Archbishop of Khartoum, focusing on ways to end fighting between RSF and SAF, facilitate humanitarian access to those in need, and return to a civilian government. In engagements, embassy officials stressed the importance of identifying measures, such as laws and outreach campaigns, to advance religious tolerance among the various religious groups.