

Document #2051708

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 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 Juba, police detained a local religious leader in April for flouting COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

In July, a local militia in Jonglei State attacked an Anglican church compound, killing 31 persons, including the church’s dean and 14 women and children. The country’s network of religious groups remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country, according to researchers and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations provided shelter from the fighting. Observers said that at times religious workers became targets for speaking out about what they believed to be the underlying causes of the conflict.

Embassy officials raised concerns with government representatives regarding conflict-related violence and its impact on religious workers. The U.S. Ambassador 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 January.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The 2010 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report estimated that Christians make up 60 percent of the population; followers of indigenous (animist) religions, 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 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 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. 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

According to local media, three South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF) soldiers attacked members of the Revival Movement Church in Loka West, Central Equatoria, on Christmas Eve. The Archbishop of Central Equatoria and Bishop of the Diocese of Lainya said the soldiers forced church members to drink alcohol and locked five men in a hut before setting it on fire. The soldiers reportedly abducted and raped three women, forcing them to carry looted property to SSPDF barracks. Fifteen persons were injured in the attack, which the Archbishop stated was the second incident in which soldiers forced Christians to drink alcohol. The Archbishop said they reported the attack to the SSPDF in Lainya, and the soldiers were arrested two days later.

Local and international media reported the arrest on April 26 of Abraham Chol Maketh, leader of the Cush International Church, for violating presidential directives banning all gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Users expressed outrage on social media after photographs became public showing Maketh in a police car, stripped of his clothes. According to a police spokesperson, Maketh removed his clothes during the encounter, resisted arrest, and verbally assaulted officers. The courts charged Maketh under five sections of the penal code, including causing a public nuisance and criminal intimidation, and he received a one-month sentence. He was released after spending less than a week in Juba Central Prison.

Both Christian and Muslim prayers were given to open most official events, with the government often providing translation from English to Arabic.

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. 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 mandates on content.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, on July 27, a local militia attacked St Luke’s Cathedral in Jonglei State, killing 31 persons. The attack occurred in Makol Cui village, approximately 20 miles north of Jonglei’s capital, Bor. Bishop Moses Anur Ayom of the Athooch Diocese reported those killed included the church’s dean and 14 women and children who took refuge in the church compound, which was set on fire.

The country’s religious institutions remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country, according to researchers and international NGOs. Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and COVID-19. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations provided shelter from the fighting. Observers said that at times religious workers became targets for speaking out about what they believed to be the underlying causes of the conflict.

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. After delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in October, Sant’Egidio hosted peace talks in Rome between the transitional government and the opposition groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised concerns with government representatives regarding conflict-related violence and its impact on religious workers. They also expressed this concern to religious leaders. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly participated in discussions with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, South Sudan Council of Churches, Episcopal Church of 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 January, the embassy hosted an interfaith reception for Christian and Muslim leaders, highlighting its support for the role religious leaders have to play in peace-building and reconciliation.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2020)

Country:

South Sudan

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-sudan/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 May 2021

Document ID:

2051708

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

