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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Sudan

Executive Summary

The Interim National Constitution (INC) provides for freedom of religious creed and the rights to worship, assemble, and maintain places of worship. Some laws and government practices are based on sharia and do not provide protections for religious minorities, including minority Muslim groups. The criminal code criminalizes apostasy, blasphemy, and conversion from Islam to another religion. There were reports of the government denying permits for the construction of new churches, detaining church members, closing or demolishing pre-existing churches, restricting non-Muslim religious groups and missionaries from operating in or entering the country, censoring religious materials and leaders, and arresting or intimidating suspected proselytizers. Authorities detained 27 individuals following a seminar in which they reportedly said they did not acknowledge the *hadiths* (the Prophet Mohammad's teachings). In September local media reported an imam was charged with apostasy for reportedly saying that bowing or prostrating to someone other than God in certain social contexts was permissible. In March two South Sudanese pastors from the Presbyterian Evangelical Church stood trial in Khartoum after several months of detention for crimes including espionage and undermining the constitutional system – both of which carried the death penalty. Both pastors were convicted of lesser charges and released based on time already served. The government initiated an appeal in absentia in November. There were multiple reports of individuals being arrested for “indecent dress,” including 12 Christian female students wearing trousers. One was sentenced to 20 lashes, although the penalty was not imposed. As part of the National Dialogue, representatives from the government, civil society, and political parties debated, among other issues, the centrality of religion to national identity in an effort to inform future legal reforms, including to the constitution.

There were reports Muslim citizens sometimes harassed and intimidated non-Muslims. Unknown assailants burned down the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gedaref. A small but growing minority of Salafist groups continued their rhetoric against other Muslims and non-Muslims.

In high-level discussions with the government, U.S. officials encouraged respect for religious freedom and the protection of minority religious groups. On separate visits to Sudan, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised specific cases with government officials and emphasized the government's need to bring the country's legal framework into compliance with international human rights obligations. Embassy officials stressed respect for religious freedom was crucial to improved relations with the United States. The Embassy maintained close contact with religious leaders, faith groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and monitored and attended many of the legal proceedings for those prosecuted in connection with their religious beliefs.

Since 1999, Sudan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Sudan as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the restriction on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the Government of Sudan in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, currently set forth in section 7042(j) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2014 (Div. K, Pub. L. 113-76), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 36.1 million (July 2015 estimate). The Sudanese government estimates approximately 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Other sources vary. It is unclear whether government estimates include long-term residents of Southern Sudanese origin (who are predominantly Christian or animist), whose status remains under review by the government. Some religious advocacy groups estimate non-Muslims make up between 15 to 20 percent of the population.

Almost all Muslims are Sunni, although there are significant distinctions among followers of different Sunni traditions, particularly among Sufi orders. There are also small Shia Muslim communities based predominantly in Khartoum. At least one Jewish family remains in the Khartoum area.

The government reports there are 36 Christian denominations in the country. Christians reside 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.

There are long-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians in Khartoum and other cities. There are also Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, largely made up of refugees and migrants, in Khartoum and the eastern part of the country. Other smaller Christian groups include the Africa Inland Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Sudan Church of Christ, Sudan Interior Church, Sudan Pentecostal Church, Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Church of the Sudan, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Government statistics indicate less than 1 percent of the population, primarily in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states, adheres to traditional African religious beliefs. However, some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of these traditional beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The INC provides for freedom of religious creed and worship, and grants individuals the right to declare their religious beliefs and manifest them by way of worship, education, practice, or performance, subject to requirements of laws and public order. It prohibits the coercion of individuals to adopt a faith they do not believe in or to engage in rites or services to which they do not voluntarily consent. These rights may be suspended during a state of emergency. The INC states that nationally enacted legislation shall be based on sharia, but otherwise does not stipulate laws based on religion.

According to the INC, all rights and freedoms enshrined in international human rights instruments ratified by Sudan are considered integral parts of the INC's bill of rights.

The INC allows religious groups to establish and maintain humanitarian and charitable institutions, acquire property and materials related to their religious rites and customs, write and disseminate religious publications, teach religion, solicit public and private contributions, select their own leaders, observe days of rest, celebrate religious holidays, and communicate with constituents on matters of religion.

The INC has not been amended to reflect the 2011 independence of South Sudan. The INC states that where the majority of residents do not practice the religion or customs on which the national legislation is based, citizens may introduce new legislation consistent with their religion and customs or refer the existing legislation to the Council of States, the lower house of parliament. To date no group has attempted to introduce new legislation or referred existing legislation to the council based on minority religious beliefs, practices, or customs.

The INC denies recognition to any political party that discriminates based on religion and specifically prohibits religious discrimination against candidates for the national civil service. Constitutional violations of freedom of religion may be pursued in the Constitutional Court; however, cases of discrimination often originate and are addressed in lower courts dealing with civil or criminal charges.

National laws reflect a sharia system of jurisprudence. The criminal code states the law shall be based on sharia sources and include *hudood*, *qisas*, and *diyah* principles (specific serious crimes and related restitution and punishment). It takes into consideration sharia schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*). Other criminal and civil laws, including public order laws, are determined at the state level.

Some aspects of the criminal code specify punishments for Muslims based on sharia principles. For example, the criminal code stipulates 40 lashes for a Muslim who drinks, possesses, or sells alcohol; no punishment is prescribed for a non-Muslim who drinks or possesses alcohol in private. The criminal code stipulates if a non-Muslim is arrested for public drinking, possessing, or selling of alcohol, he or she is subject to trial, but the punishment will not be based on *hudood* principles. Most other articles of the code specify punishments according to the region (North or South) where the crime occurred, rather than the religion of the accused.

The criminal code's section on religious offenses includes articles on violations against any religion, such as insulting religion or blasphemy, disturbing places of worship, and trespassing upon places of burial.

The criminal code states, "whoever insults any religion, their 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, flogging of up to 40 lashes, and/or a fine. The government has only enforced the law against those it has found to be blasphemers of Islam. In January the article was amended to include two additional sub-articles, which prescribe penalties for any non-Muslim who curses the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, or members of his households of up to five years' imprisonment and 40 lashes.

There is no penalty for someone who converts from another religion to Islam. The criminal code does not explicitly ban proselytizing, but criminalizes both apostasy and acts that encourage apostasy against Islam. In January the government

amended the criminal code to widen the legal definition of apostasy. In addition to those who convert from Islam to another religion, any Muslim who questions the Quran, the Sahaba (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet may also be considered guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death. Those charged with apostasy are allowed to repent within a period decided by the court. Under the new amendment, those who do repent may still face up to five years in prison.

By law, the justice minister can 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 and a religious committee composed of the Sudan Scholars Organization and members of the Islamic Panel of Scholars and Preachers (Fiqh Council, an official body of 40 Muslim religious scholars responsible for Islamic jurisprudence), which consults with the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments (MGE) to ensure decisions comply with Islamic legal regulations.

Muslim men may marry women of any faith, including Christianity and Judaism. A Muslim woman cannot legally marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

Separate family courts exist for Muslims and non-Muslims to address personal affairs such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, according to their religious norms. 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 that the non-Muslim parent will raise the child in a religion other than Islam.

According to Muslim personal status laws, Christians (including children) may not inherit assets from a Muslim.

To gain official recognition by the government, religious groups must register at the state level with the MGE, or a related ministry such as the Ministry of Culture or the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), depending on the nature of the group and its activities. The HAC oversees NGOs and nonprofit organizations. Religious groups with humanitarian or development agencies must register those bodies as nonprofit NGOs with the HAC. Groups registered with the HAC must have their activities approved and financial statements reviewed by the government. Religious groups that do not register are ineligible to apply for other administrative procedures, including land ownership, tax exemptions, and work permits.

The MGE regulates religious practice, including activities such as reviewing Friday sermons at mosques. It determines, along with the state-level entities responsible for land grants and planning, whether to provide authorizations or permits to build new houses of worship, taking into account zoning concerns such as the distance between religious institutions and population density (the allocation of land to religious entities is determined at the state level). The MGE is mandated to assist both mosques and churches in obtaining tax exemptions and duty-free permits to import items such as furniture and religious items for houses of worship; it also assists visitors attending religiously sponsored meetings and activities to obtain tourist visas through the Ministry of Interior.

An interministerial committee must approve foreign clergy and other foreigners seeking a residency permit.

Public order laws, based largely on the government's interpretation of Islamic law, vary by state and are primarily enforced in large cities. These laws prohibit indecent dress and other "offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality." The law grants the Special Public Order police and judges wide latitude in arresting and passing sentence on accused offenders.

The state-mandated education curriculum requires all schools, including international schools and private schools operated by Christian groups, to provide Islamic education classes to Muslim students, from pre-school through the second year of university. Some private schools have government-provided teachers to teach Islamic subjects. Public schools do not require non-Muslims to attend Islamic education classes, but must provide them with other religious instruction. A minimum of 15 Christian students per class is required for Christian instruction in public schools. According to the Ministry of Education, following the separation of South Sudan, this ratio has not been met in most schools. Students therefore attend religious study classes outside of regular school hours.

The curriculum for religious education is determined by the Ministry of Education. According to the ministry, the Islamic curriculum is intended to reflect one form of Islam. According to government representatives, this implies following the Sunni tradition.

Government offices and businesses follow an Islamic workweek (Sunday to Thursday). The law requires employers to give Christian employees two hours off on Sundays for religious activity. Citizens are granted leave from work to celebrate Orthodox Christmas, an official state holiday, along with several key Islamic holidays.

The president appoints the Fiqh Council to four-year renewable terms to advise the government and issue fatwas on religious matters, including levying customs duties on the importation of religious materials and the payment of interest on loans for public infrastructure. The panel's opinions are not legally binding. Muslim religious scholars are free to present differing religious and political viewpoints in public.

Government Practices

There were reports of the government detaining Muslims on religious grounds, detaining church members, arresting or intimidating suspected proselytizers, denying permits for the construction of churches, closing or demolishing pre-existing

churches, censoring religious materials and leaders, and restricting non-Muslim religious groups and missionaries from operating in or entering the country

The government instituted new amendments to the criminal code widening the legal definition of apostasy to ensure the respect of religions and to prevent words or actions that might be considered disrespectful and spur social tensions. These amendments went into effect in January. International and domestic human rights observers expressed concern that the amendments targeted and discriminated against smaller Muslim groups, especially the Shia, who had alternative approaches to Islam.

On September 7, local media reported that authorities charged Sufi Imam Dirdiri Abd al-Rahman with apostasy for allegedly stating during a sermon that prostration in prayer to someone other than God is permissible. He was later released on bail and subsequently denied the accusation in an interview with a local newspaper. The newspaper reported that a member of the Salafist Ansar al-Sunna group initiated the complaint leading to the charges against Abd al-Rahman. He was acquitted on December 20 due to lack of evidence.

On November 2 and 3, authorities in the Kalakla area of Khartoum detained 27 adherents of a form of Islam which takes the Quran as the sole source of religious authority, and rejects the sanctity of the *hadiths*, contrary to the government's official view of Islam. The arrests came during a seminar in which two individuals were leading a group discussion regarding their views of Islamic teachings. Police charged members of the group with crimes including disturbing public order and apostasy under the newly broadened apostasy provision. The courts dropped charges against two of the defendants after they retracted their statements and reaffirmed their belief in the religious authority of the *hadiths*, leaving a remaining 25 defendants. At a December 9 court session, the judge questioned the individuals on the technicalities of their rituals, including the order of ceremonial procedures and the order in which they offered certain prayers. With the exception of the two defendants who retracted their earlier statements, all adherents reaffirmed their practice of Islam and were charged with apostasy. After six weeks of detention, a court granted the defendants bail on December 14. Court proceedings were scheduled to resume in February 2016.

On December 19, Kowa Shamal and Hassan Abdelrahim, both pastors at the Sudanese Church of Christ in Khartoum, were arrested in their homes by authorities from the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). Their detention followed the arrest of Christian activist and member of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Talahon Nigosi Kassa Ratta, on December 14 in Khartoum. According to a religious organization, Shamal was conditionally released on December 21 and required to report to the NISS office daily, where he was held from morning until evening. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported that Ratta was last seen at Kober Men's Prison at the end of December, but was moved to an unknown location. The location and charges against Abdelrahim remained unknown as of the end of the year.

In December 2014 and January 2015, authorities arrested two South Sudanese pastors, Reverend Yat Michael Ruot Puk and Reverend Peter Yen Reith. Rev. Michael was arrested after he addressed a congregation at the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Khartoum. Authorities arrested Rev. Peter after he made inquiries about the whereabouts of his associate, Rev. Michael. The NISS arrested both clergymen and held them incommunicado at an unknown location for three months. On March 1, the government charged the pastors with eight offenses including treason, espionage, and undermining the constitution, all punishable by death. On March 2, authorities transferred the pastors to a high security prison. The pastors went on a hunger strike on March 28 and 29 to protest their continued detention without trial and lack of access to lawyers. The case eventually came before a court on May 19. In June authorities again denied the pastors visitation rights, preventing any access to family or legal aid. Following a hearing on August 5, a Khartoum court convicted Rev. Michael of inciting hatred and Rev. Peter of breaching public peace. Both were released the same day based on time already served, but authorities banned them from traveling outside the country. NGOs reported both pastors fled the country due to fear of continued detention and persecution. In November, on government appeal, the court reversed its original decision and called for the re-arrest and retrial of the pastors in absentia. Representatives from the Christian community stated the government's decision to re-arrest and retry the pastors was an effort to intimidate the evangelical Christian community. The basis for the judgment remained unclear. At year's end, the legal defence team had finalized plans to submit an appeal to the Supreme Court to challenge the Court of Appeals' November 19 retrial decision.

In December the legal defense team that defended Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag in the original apostasy case brought against her in 2014 submitted in absentia an appeal to the Constitutional Court in order to challenge the constitutionality of the charge of apostasy, which the lawyers said was primarily a religious concept. The legal team reported that in 2014 charges against Ishag were dropped on the basis of her state of mental well-being, not because the court should not have found her guilty in the first place.

In August the father of Isheikh Mohamed Ali Kadod expressed concerns because Isheikh, who was born a Muslim, converted to Christianity. Apostasy charges were formally filed in November, but it was not confirmed by whom. The judge ordered that Isheikh be assessed for mental illness. The outcome of the assessment was unknown. The case was ongoing at the end of the year.

During the July demolition of the Sudanese Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPECS) in Bahri, police arrested Pastor Hafiz Mengisto, a member of the church's leadership, and Mohaned Mustafa, the church's legal advisor. Both men were charged with obstructing a public servant from performing the duties of his office and were released on bail. The trial began on December 14. On December 23, the case against Mustafa was dropped on the basis that the prosecution had failed to follow procedure when initiating a criminal case against a registered lawyer. On December 29, the court acquitted Mengisto.

On June 25, police arrested 12 Christian female students of South Sudanese and Nuban origin after a ceremony at the Evangelical Baptist Church in Khartoum North for “indecent dress” for wearing trousers. Authorities released two of the women from police custody the same day without charges. At a court hearing on July 6, a judge deemed the dress worn by one of the women in court as “indecent,” fined her 500 Sudanese pounds (SDG) (\$75), and ordered her to return to court on August 16 to face the initial charge of “indecent dress.” On August 16, the court sentenced her to 20 lashes and another fine of 500 SDG (\$75). Authorities, however, suspended the 20 lashes (meaning they could be reimposed if she were again convicted of a similar charge) and the woman did not appeal the ruling. On July 14, a court sentenced another of the accused to a fine of 500 SDG (\$75). The court convicted three other women on August 12, and fined them 50 SDG (\$8) each. The court acquitted the other five defendants on August 12 and 16.

Some churches said the government repeatedly denied them permits to construct churches or obtain new land permits. According to various church representatives, the government’s decisions on which permits to grant were skewed towards mosques and not based on clear regulations. The government justified its policy of not granting permits for the construction of new churches by stating the churches did not meet the government’s population density parameters and zoning plans.

The government closed or demolished places of worship and cultural centers affiliated with religious institutions. International observers noted Christian places of worship were disproportionately affected compared to Muslim institutions by zoning changes. According to the government, the places of worship that were demolished or closed were those that had not been established formally after South Sudan’s separation and lacked proper land permits or institutional registration. The government stated mosques, churches, schools, hospitals, and residences were all affected equally by the urban planning projects. There were no confirmed reports of destruction of Muslim places of worship during the year.

In late October armed police oversaw the demolition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Omdurman. According to the Khartoum State Governor’s Office, authorities had informed the church leaders about impending zoning changes that would affect the church and the greater area over recent years and encouraged them to relocate. According to local sources, however, authorities informed church leaders about the planned demolition only 24 hours in advance. Despite an appeal to the local commissioner, the church was partially destroyed. Sources stated this was the third time authorities in Omdurman had attempted to demolish the church. A mosque on the same plot of land was left standing. According to authorities, the government would provide financial compensation and new land in another area of Khartoum to the church and other institutions affected by the rezoning. As of the end of the year, the church had not received compensation.

On October 27, authorities demolished the Sudanese Church of Christ in the Karari area of Omdurman. According to church representatives, government authorities stated the church was built on government land and demolished it without prior notification. Church representatives filed a complaint with the MGE in November. As of the end of the year, the church had not received any compensation.

In July security forces demolished portions of the SPECS church of Bahri, which had been in a legal battle to retain ownership of its property since 2013. According to SPECS representatives, the government-appointed Evangelical Community Council had sold the church’s land to private investors. In August NISS officers prevented a high-level foreign delegation from viewing the church premises and meeting with church leadership. On August 31, the Administrative Court of Appeal ruled the MGE’s actions in appointing members to the church council to facilitate sale of the church were illegal and an interference with church matters. In October the SPECS won a related appeal against the investors. As of the end of the year, court orders cancelling the investors’ claim to the church’s property were still pending, portions of the church remained closed, and the church had not received any compensation.

Local media cited government officials as stating the Iranian culture center in Khartoum, which the government ordered to close in September 2014, had sought to spread Shia Islam in the country and, as such, posed a national security threat. Members of the Shia community said the government discriminated against them in professional settings and they were not able to openly identify or practice their faith.

The Constitutional Court agreed to review the government’s closure of the Khartoum Cultural Center of the Pentecostal Church in 2014. Authorities closed the center, stating the facility where it held church services was in a zoned residential area. The government seized the property, despite the Pentecostal Church’s holding legal title to the land. To keep the facility open, Church leaders subsequently agreed to use the center only for administrative purposes and not for worship services. The court did not announce a final ruling in the case by year’s end.

At year’s end, there was no resolution to the case involving the government’s demolition of the Church of Jesus Christ in Alizba, Khartoum North, in June 2014. According to the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), the church had not received any compensation. The government allowed church members to pray in an open space in the general area, but would not allow them to construct a church. Church officials stated the government has denied permit requests since the 1990s, when the church opened. In November 2014, the MGE stated the church had not filed for a plot of land and, therefore, the church had been established informally and never obtained proper land permits or registration. Because many of the church’s members were Nuban, it is difficult to categorize this incident as being solely based on religious identity.

Government officials continued to state Islamic principles should inform official policies and often pointed to sharia as the basis for Sudan’s legal framework. President Bashir and other senior figures frequently emphasized the Islamic majority of the country and stated it was the government’s duty to “protect the rights of the majority religion.”

In October the government engaged civil society and political parties in a National Dialogue to look at future political reforms, including whether future legal reforms, such as changes to the INC, should be based on sharia or remain secular. The National Dialogue was extended from January to February 2016, to allow for more participation from opposition

groups. Some participating groups argued for strengthening the role of Islam in government and politics, while other groups called for greater secularism.

The MGE said decisions regarding the approval and administration of religious institutions should be considered a federal (not state) competency, in order to better control the activities of violent extremist groups.

There were reports government security services closely monitored mosques.

Security authorities imposed sanctions on imams, ranging from stern official warnings to arrest and detention, for those accused of making anti-government statements, inciting hatred, advocating violence, or espousing “*takfir*” ideology, which considers other Muslims who do not follow a prescribed form of Islam apostates.

The government restricted non-Muslim religious groups from operating or entering the country and continued to monitor activities and censor material published by religious institutions. The MGE said it granted a limited number of Christian missionary groups permission to engage in humanitarian activities and promote Muslim-Christian cooperation.

Some Christian churches reported they were required to pay or negotiate taxes on items such as vehicles, even though the government had previously granted them or their humanitarian institutions tax-exempt status.

Some church officials reported the government refused to grant, or delayed renewing, work and residency visas to church employees of foreign origin, including missionaries and clergy, or to individuals it thought would proselytize in public places. Individuals not in possession of a valid visa were required to pay a 40 SDG (\$6.25) fine for every day they were not in status. The government only granted residence permits with less than a year’s validity. According to some Catholic Church officials, the government relaxed some restrictions on the entry of foreign clergy during the year.

The government closely scrutinized those suspected of proselytizing and used administrative rationales, or other aspects of the law such as immigration status, to either deport or exert financial pressure on them. As a result, most non-Muslim groups refrained from public proselytizing.

Some prominent ministries requested information on religious affiliation on their employment applications. Some official government documents, such as birth certificates, also required identification of an individual’s religion.

In response to reports that at least 70 university students left the country to support Da’esh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), the government publicly supported initiatives aimed to counter violent extremism.

The government often stated it did not have non-Muslim teachers available to teach Christian courses in public schools. Some public schools excused non-Muslims from Islamic education classes. Some private schools, including Christian schools, received government-provided Muslim teachers to teach Islamic subjects, but non-Muslim students are not required to attend those classes. The Ministry of Education removed Shia related references from its curriculum in 2014.

The government restricted some religiously based political parties. The Republican Brothers Party, the registration of which the government had rejected in 2014 because its ideology promoted secularism, thus contradicting the sharia basis of the constitution, was unable to participate in 2015 national elections and filed a case with the Constitutional Court.

The government occasionally referred to rebel groups as “secular” or “anti-Islamic.”

A few Christian politicians held seats in the government. The MGE Director of Church Affairs remained a Muslim.

The government closed Tearfund, a faith-based NGO that provided humanitarian services to children in Darfur. There was no explanation for the closure; observers said it was unclear whether the closure was related to the organization’s religious affiliation.

Prisons provided prayer spaces for Muslims. 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.

The government allowed the SCC, an ecumenical body representing 12 member churches in Sudan and affiliated with the World Council of Churches, to engage in civic education, advocacy, peace and reconciliation, relief, and development services, either directly or through its member churches.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to news reports, on October 16, unknown assailants burned down property belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gedaref, Eastern Sudan, including the office containing church books and the church house. Government officials in Khartoum vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice, but did not publicly condemn the act. In December local authorities in Gedaref stated they had no knowledge of the incident. As of year’s end, the Church had received no compensation.

Government officials reported there were tensions between some Muslim groups. Muslims and non-Muslims said a small, growing, and sometimes vocal minority of Salafist groups continued to be a concern to them. Some groups said that, by allowing the largest of these Salafist groups, the Ansar al-Sunna, to operate without much surveillance or interference, the government gave tacit approval to the organization's views.

Individual Muslims and Christians reported generally good relationships between Muslims and Christians at the societal level and stated that instances of intolerance or discrimination by nongovernment entities were generally considered as isolated incidents. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Observers stated that societal tensions based on religious beliefs figured more prominently among different Muslim groups than across different religious groups.

The Sudan Inter-Religious Council, a registered nonprofit, nonpolitical organization consisting of a body of scholars, half of whom are Muslim and half Christian, continued to advise the MGE and sought to encourage interfaith dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In high-level meetings, U.S. Department of State officials encouraged the government to respect religious freedom and protect the rights of minority religious groups. U.S. embassy representatives stressed respect for religious freedom was crucial to improved bilateral relations.

In November the Charge d'Affaires met with the state minister from the MGE to discuss the general status of religious freedom and review the government's actions relevant to religious freedom throughout the year. The Charge d'Affaires expressed concern about specific cases that had come to the embassy's attention, especially in relation to the enforcement of public order laws and the demolition of churches.

During a visit in August, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials and raised concern over specific cases, including women arrested for indecent dress and the status of various churches seeking registration permits, land rights, or compensation for property destroyed or confiscated by the government. He attended the court hearing of the two South Sudanese pastors and welcomed the government's initial decision to release them on time already served. The Ambassador at Large emphasized the need to bring the country's legal framework into compliance with its international human rights obligations. The Ambassador at Large met with religious leaders representing a spectrum of religious views within both the Christian and Muslim faiths, including a group of female religious representatives, to discuss key challenges and opportunities for U.S. engagement. In September the U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan reinforced to the foreign minister in Khartoum messages conveyed by the Ambassador at Large.

In a subsequent meeting in October at the United Nations General Assembly, the Ambassador at Large raised concerns with the under secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about ongoing cases, and underscored U.S. commitment to engaging with the Sudanese government to improve religious freedom.

During a February visit, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised concerns with several ministries, including the MGE, regarding the inadequate legal framework and lack of protections for religious minorities as reason for continued designation as a CPC. In meetings with religious leaders, he discussed challenges and opportunities for improving the religious freedom environment in the country and raised specific concerns about apostasy cases and the destruction of churches.

In August the embassy cohosted a conference with the Afro-Arab Youth Council on countering violent extremism. The conference included a number of lectures and opening remarks by the first vice president and chair of the Sudanese Islamic Fiqh Council. The embassy also sponsored the participation of a representative from the Islamic Society of North America, a renowned Sudanese American imam with extensive experience in the field of countering violent extremism. The imam subsequently met with senior government officials, civil society, university faculty and students, as well as with potential targets of terrorist recruitment, to discuss the role of religious leaders in countering extremist ideologies among youth and advocate for a tolerant interpretation of Islam.

Embassy officials attended religious ceremonies of different groups and underscored the importance of religious tolerance in regular meetings with leaders of Muslim and Christian groups. U.S. government representatives closely monitored and attended many of the legal proceedings concerning religious organizations and religious leaders. Embassy officials also kept in close contact with NGOs, civil society, and journalists to gather their perspectives on religious freedom and receive updates about ongoing cases.

The embassy regularly utilized its social media outlets to share articles and messaging related to religious tolerance and freedom.

Since 1999, Sudan has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State re-designated Sudan as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the restriction on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the Government of Sudan in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, currently set forth in section 7042(j) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related

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