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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - South Sudan

Executive Summary

The transitional constitution (TC) and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom, but Muslim representatives stated that Muslims faced discrimination in obtaining nationality or identity documents.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (July 2013 estimate). The majority is Christian. There are no reliable statistics on the number of Muslims or traditional religious minorities. Studies from the 1980s and the early 2000s estimated Muslims constituted between 18 and 35 percent of the population, but the number of Muslims has probably declined through migration to Sudan after South Sudanese independence in 2011. The acting general secretary of the South Sudan Council of Churches states the seven principal Christian groups are Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Sudan Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and the African Inland Church. Smaller populations of Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, and Greek Orthodox are also present in the country. A substantial part of the population in isolated parts of the country probably adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or combines Christian and indigenous practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The TC and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The TC states, "All religions shall be treated equally, and religion or religious beliefs shall not be used for divisive purposes." This document is the supreme law until the adoption of a permanent constitution.

The TC provides the right to: worship or assemble freely in connection with any religion or belief and to establish places for these purposes; solicit and receive voluntary financial contributions; own property for religious purposes; write, issue, and disseminate religious publications; communicate with individuals and communities in matters of religion and beliefs at national and international levels; teach religion or beliefs in places suitable for these purposes; train, appoint, and designate by succession one's own clergy; and observe religious holidays.

The TC specifies the regulation of religious matters within each state as the executive and legislative responsibility of the state government.

The TC allows religious groups to establish and maintain appropriate faith-based, charitable, or humanitarian institutions. The government does not require religious groups to register.

The law prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion against public servants, officials, and employees with respect to remuneration, terms, conditions, benefits, and privileges of services.

Government Practices

Muslims reported they regularly faced discrimination, particularly in applications for citizenship or documentation. Muslim community representatives stated officials refused most nationality and passport applications for applicants of Islamic faith, often with no explanation. Others, including Greek Christians born in South Sudan, also reported problems with their citizenship and documentation applications.

Civil society leaders reported state governments occasionally expropriated Muslim-owned lands, many of which the pre-independence Sudanese government granted to Muslims during "Islamization" campaigns beginning in the 1980s. Islamic religious groups appealed to national authorities for relief. At year's end national authorities had not acted on most of these appeals, which were complicated by the absence of laws governing communal land rights, although President Kiir said this property should be returned to the Muslim owners.

President Kiir made statements promoting freedom of religion, and the presidential advisor on religious affairs released press statements calling for "peace and unity" among religious groups. Both a Christian representative and a Muslim representative read prayers at most official events, with translation from English to Arabic often provided. Such dual readings were common at public events, including smaller and more localized ones.

Muslims were represented in the government, including at least one governor, one minister, and 17 members of the National Legislative Assembly.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Muslim and Christian leaders reported discrimination and mistrust of the Muslim minority was widespread due to the historical affiliation of many Muslims with the North during the civil war. Muslim community leaders reported significant discrimination in employment. Difficulty obtaining nationality documents and weaker English language skills within the Muslim community may have contributed to low levels of employment, although high unemployment was a problem across society.

Religious leaders engaged in an active dialogue. Christian and Muslim leaders regularly called upon one another for discussions on such matters as what they considered appropriate and fair representation of religious faiths in the government.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society. The Ambassador met regularly with key religious leaders, including leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, the Episcopal Church of Sudan, and the Catholic Church. The Ambassador hosted members of the Muslim community for an iftar in celebration of the Muslim holiday Eid al-Fitr. The guests discussed religious freedom, differences between views of religion in South Sudan and Sudan, and challenges facing Muslims in South Sudan.

On December 17, the Department of State ordered the departure of non-emergency U.S. government personnel from South Sudan because of ongoing violence and political and social unrest. The U.S. embassy remained open but suspended its normal operations in the country.

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