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2016 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 the government's interpretation of a sharia system of jurisprudence and do not provide protections for religious minorities, including minority Muslim groups. The law criminalizes apostasy, blasphemy, and conversion from Islam to another religion, as well as questioning the Quran, the Sahaba (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet. While the law does not specifically address proselytizing, the government reportedly criminalizes proselytizing under what it considers the crime of apostasy. There were eyewitness reports of the government arresting, detaining, or intimidating Christian clergy and church members, as well as an imam, denying permits for the construction of new churches, closing or demolishing existing churches and attempting to close church schools, restricting non-Muslim religious groups and missionaries from operating in or entering the country, and censoring religious materials and leaders. According to human rights activists, authorities charged and convicted Christian and Muslim women with "indecent dress" for wearing pants and fined and lashed them accordingly on a daily basis. The National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) arrested Imam Yousif Abdullah Abaker in July following a sermon criticizing the performance of the central and state governments and holding them accountable for the loss of lives, particularly in Sudan's Darfur region. At year's end, Abaker was being held in Al Huda Prison without charges. Four Christians, who were arrested in December 2015 and detained for eight months, were charged in August with eight crimes, including espionage and "warring against the state," both of which carry the death penalty. Their trials remained ongoing at year's end. A member of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPECs) who was also arrested in December 2015 was released in May, although never charged. Authorities arrested and detained 14 individuals for three days for protesting the sale of a SPECs-owned school by a government-appointed board. They were subsequently released on bail, convicted of disturbing the public peace, and fined. Reportedly, women (including women of Christian and of Nuba origin) were fined or lashed for wearing "indecent dress." The government attempted to expropriate another SPECs-owned school and temporarily detained nine people, but a court ultimately blocked the expropriation. The authorities reportedly demolished two churches (one Catholic and one Presbyterian) in Soba County of Khartoum State in December, stating the churches were on publicly-owned land. The authorities gave three churches in the Hajj Yusuf area of Khartoum notice of imminent demolition due to improper land registration documents. The government issued a written notice to the Soba County Sudan Church of Christ that the church had no legal claim to the land on which it was built in 1986. The Sudanese Council of Churches (SCC) and lawyers appealed on behalf of the churches. As of the end of the year, the churches had not been demolished.

There were reports Muslim citizens sometimes harassed and intimidated non-Muslims. Muslims and non-Muslims said a small, growing, and sometimes vocal minority of Salafist groups continued to be a concern to them on religious grounds and because some advocate violence.

In high-level discussions with the government, U.S. officials encouraged respect for religious freedom and the protection of minority religious groups. The U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom raised specific cases with government officials and emphasized the government's need to bring the country's legal framework into compliance with its international human rights obligations. In meetings with the foreign minister, the U.S. Special Envoy raised the issue of the detained pastors, urging the government to grant a fair and speedy trial. Embassy officials stressed that 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 October 31, 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 36.7 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the government, approximately 97 percent of the population is Muslim following the separation of South Sudan in 2011. It is unclear whether government estimates include South Sudanese (predominantly Christian or animist) who did not leave after the 2011 split or returned after conflict erupted in South Sudan in 2013, or other non-South Sudanese, non-Muslim groups. Many religious advocacy groups estimate non-Muslims make up more than 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 relatively small, but long-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians in Khartoum, El Obeid in North Kordofan, River Nile, Gezira, and parts of eastern Sudan, but the government has not released statistics on these populations. 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. The membership of these groups is difficult to gauge due to lack of records in some groups, a lack of current information provided by the government, and restricted access to groups in conflict areas.

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

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. The INC has not been amended to reflect the 2011 independence of South Sudan.

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 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.

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 are based on a sharia system of jurisprudence. The criminal code states the law, including state and local, shall be based on sharia sources and include *hudood*, *qisas*, and *diyah* principles (specific serious crimes and related restitution and punishment). The criminal code takes into consideration multiple sharia schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*). The Islamic Panel of Scholars and Preachers (Fiqh Council) determines under which conditions a particular school of thought will apply. Other criminal and civil laws, including public order laws, are determined at the state and local level.

The law provides no bar to individuals who convert from another religion to Islam. The criminal code does not explicitly mention proselytizing, but criminalizes both conversion from Islam to any other faith (i.e. apostasy) and acts that encourage conversion from Islam. Those who convert from Islam to another religion as well as any Muslim who questions the teachings of 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, but may still face up to five years in prison.

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 article includes provisions that prescribe penalties for any non-Muslim who curses the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, or members of his respective households of up to five years' imprisonment and 40 lashes.

The Ministry of Guidance and Endowments (MGE) regulates religious practice, including activities such as reviewing Friday sermons at mosques. The president appoints the Fiqh Council, an official body of 40 Muslim religious scholars responsible for explaining and interpreting Islamic jurisprudence, to four-year renewable terms. The council advises the government and issues fatwas on religious matters, including levying 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 panel's opinions are not legally binding. Muslim religious scholars are free to present differing religious and political viewpoints in public.

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 that also engage in humanitarian or development activities must register with those bodies as nonprofit NGOs by filing a standard application required by the HAC for both local and international NGOs. The application must include the names and addresses of founding members, a copy of the organization's constitution, and an organization chart and be accompanied by a fee. Such organizations must have at least 30 members, although the relevant minister may register an organization with fewer members with proof of its financial stability. In addition, international NGOs legally may not be from a country in a state of war with Sudan and are required to be registered in its country of origin, have an approved registration certificate from the Sudanese embassy or diplomatic mission, present evidence of its financial and technical capabilities, and meet other conditions the minister may apply. Groups registered with the HAC must then have their activities approved and financial statements reviewed by the government. Only religious groups that register are eligible to apply for other administrative procedures, including land ownership, tax exemptions, and work permits.

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 preschool through the second year of university. 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. Non-Muslim students therefore attend religious study classes of their own religion outside of regular school hours in order to fulfill the requirement for all students to receive religious instruction.

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, which, according to government representatives, requires following the Sunni tradition.

The MGE 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 meetings sponsored by religious groups and activities to obtain tourist visas through the Ministry of Interior. The MGE also coordinates travel for the Hajj and Umra for government representatives.

Public order laws, based largely on the government's interpretation of sharia, vary by state. These laws prohibit indecent dress and other "offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality." Authorities primarily enforce such laws in large cities and enforce laws governing indecent dress against both Muslims and non-Muslims. The criminal code states acts are contrary to public morality if they are deemed so by the religion of the person performing the act or the custom of the country where the act occurs. In practice, the special Public Order police and courts have wide latitude in interpreting what dress or behaviors are indecent and in arresting and passing sentence on accused offenders.

Some aspects of the criminal code specify punishments for Muslims based on government interpretation of sharia punishment 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. The INC was amended in August to change the penalty for adultery with a married person from stoning to hanging (a punishment more commonly executed than stoning, according to legal experts). The penalty for adultery by an unmarried person is 100 lashes. An unmarried man could additionally be banished up to one year. These penalties apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Adultery includes marriages not recognized by the government. The code was not changed after the 2011 secession of South Sudan and most articles of the code specify punishments according to region, the North (majority Muslim) and the then-South (majority Christian), rather than the religion of the accused.

Under the law, the justice minister 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 and a religious committee composed of the

Sudan Scholars Organization and members of the Fiqh Council, which consults with the MGE to ensure decisions comply with Islamic legal regulations.

Under the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman (though most Sudanese sharia schools of thought advise that the non-Muslim women must be “people of the book,” i.e. either Christian or Jewish). A Muslim woman, however, legally may only marry a Muslim man. A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man may be charged with adultery.

Separate family courts exist 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 that the non-Muslim parent will 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.

Government offices and businesses are closed on Friday for prayers and follow an Islamic workweek of Sunday to Thursday. The law requires employers to give Christian employees two hours off on Sundays for religious activity. Leave from work is also granted to celebrate Orthodox Christmas, an official state holiday, along with several key Islamic holidays.

An interministerial committee, which includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the NISS, and in some cases Military Intelligence, must approve foreign clergy and other foreigners seeking a residency permit.

The INC’s bill of rights says all rights and freedoms enshrined in international human rights treaties, covenants, and instruments ratified by the country are integral parts of the INC’s bill of rights.

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

Government Practices

There were reports of authorities detaining Muslims, including an imam, and arresting, intimidating and detaining Christian clergy and church members on religious grounds, denying permits for the construction of churches, closing or demolishing existing churches and church schools, censoring religious materials and leaders, and restricting non-Muslim religious groups and missionaries from operating in or entering the country

According to human rights activists, Public Order police and courts charged women with and convicted them of “indecent dress.” Credible sources reported that women were fined and lashed accordingly on a daily basis in Khartoum for wearing pants and other dress considered indecent by of Public Order police. On June 19, 19 women were reportedly convicted in Khartoum East Court and fined 300 Sudanese pounds (SDG) (\$42) each for “indecent dress,” although it is unclear what they were wearing when arrested. In November three men and three women were playing board games in a public place when they were arrested for “indecent dress” and released after they signed a pledge they would not dress indecently again.

International and domestic human rights observers continued to express concern that 2015 legal amendments widening the definition of apostasy targeted and discriminated against smaller Muslim groups, especially Shia, whose approaches to Islam differ from the Sunni majority. For Muslim minorities, such as Shia or Quranist groups who are not part of the mainstream of Islam adopted by the state, many followers reported needing to keep a low profile regarding their places of worship, events, and gatherings.

In July the NISS arrested Imam Yousif Abdullah Abaker following an Eid al-Fitr sermon in Al Geneina in West Darfur State. In the sermon he criticized the performance of the central and state governments and held them accountable for the loss of lives in Darfur and throughout the country. Dr. Abdullah Khalil, the then-Wali (Governor) of West Darfur State, issued an administrative order to ban the imam from the state for nine months. As of the end of the year, Abaker was released; however, the governor of West Darfur State issued an exile order prohibiting Abaker’s return. Abaker reportedly planned to file a constitutional case against the governor.

In August authorities charged Czech religious worker Peter Jasek, Sudanese Church of Christ pastors Kowa Shamal and Hassan Abdelrahim, and Darfuri student Abdelmoneim Abdumaula with eight crimes, including espionage and “warring against the state.” The men were charged for reportedly donating money they said was to fund medical treatments for Ali Omer, who was injured during antigovernment demonstrations in 2013, and for interviewing and taking pictures of Christians who said they were persecuted in the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. Authorities said the donated money was for funding rebel movements and that the defendants interviewed and took pictures without prior permission from the government. Authorities also said Jasek illegally entered Sudan via South Sudan to do this. Two of the eight charges carry the death penalty. According to *Al-Yom al-Tali*, an independent Arabic newspaper, police arrested Jasek at Khartoum Airport while trying to leave the country with photos and documentation of abuses against Sudanese Muslims who converted to Christianity.

At trial, prosecutors reportedly said that Jasek had been the leader of this effort. They submitted a laptop reportedly confiscated from Jasek, which they said had voice recordings of interviews between Jasek and people who said they were victims of persecution. According to the prosecutor, Abdelrahim and Jasek met at a November 2015 religious conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where Jasek arranged to enter the country illegally. According to Christian NGOs, Abdelrahim presented Omer’s case to Jasek at the conference and Jasek reportedly subsequently donated to Omer. Jasek and other

defendants were arrested in December 2015, were transferred multiple times to various NISS detention facilities with no reasons given, and were being held in Al Huda Prison with their trial ongoing as of the end of the year. According to religious organizations, Shamal had been conditionally released in 2015 and told to report daily to the NISS, but was re-arrested in May. Shamal was again released in late December after charges against him were dropped due to insufficient evidence. SPECS activist Talahon Nigosi Kassa Ratta, also arrested in connection with the Addis Ababa conference, was released in May and never charged.

In September defense lawyers for two South Sudanese pastors, Reverend Yat Michael Ruot Puk and Reverend Peter Yen Reith, submitted an appeal to the Supreme Court to challenge the Court of Appeals' 2015 decision to retry the pastors for charges including treason, espionage, and undermining the constitution. In 2015, authorities had arrested and tried the men, convicted them of lesser crimes, and subsequently released them. Upon release, the men fled the country and did not return.

In September the legal defense team that defended Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag in an apostasy case brought against her in 2014 submitted in absentia an appeal to the Constitutional Court to challenge the constitutionality of the charge of apostasy, which the lawyers said was primarily a religious – and not legal – concept. In 2014, charges against Ishag were dropped based on her state of mental well-being, and not based on the unconstitutionality of apostasy; she subsequently left the country.

On April 3, police arrested a woman and her family for apostasy after a Quranic school reported her family to the police. The substance of the school's allegations was unknown. The case did not reach the courts, but had not yet been dismissed at year's end. On April 5, the woman was released on bail and charges against her husband and three children (ages four, five, and six) dropped, although charges remained against the woman.

In February a judge ordered Isheikh Mohamed Ali Kadod to be assessed for mental illness following his conversion from Islam to Christianity. Authorities formally filed apostasy charges against Kadod in November 2015 after his father expressed concerns about his conversion, but it was uncertain who lodged the complaint. In accordance with court orders, the authorities went to Kadod's home and questioned his father about his mental health. The judge dismissed the case after Kadod's father asserted he was suffering from mental health issues.

Court proceedings against 25 people charged with apostasy in 2015 for questioning the authority of the *hadiths* were postponed in December 2015 until February, when the courts released the defendants, with the charges against them remaining pending. As of the end of the year, the defendants remained free on bail.

On March 13-14, NISS authorities arrested Pastors Yamani Abraham and Philemon Hassan Harrata of the Bahri Evangelical Church. They released Abraham on March 14 and Harrata on March 15.

On March 21, NISS officers reportedly detained Reverend Ayoub Tilyat Koko, the head of the Sudan Church of Christ in Omdurman. According to news reports, NISS did not provide a reason for the arrest and refused to say where they were taking him. He was later released, but was required to report to NISS offices on request.

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 "*takfirist* ideology," which considers other Muslims who do not follow a prescribed form of Islam as apostates.

In August the minister of guidance and endowments announced in a press conference the ministry would begin to prevent the delivery of sermons and homilies in markets and public places. Monitoring of markets and public places by police continued through year's end, although no arrests were reported. Human rights observers decried the decision as a further restriction on free speech. Some Sufi leaders, however, welcomed the new policy as a way to curb regular inflammatory speeches by Wahhabi imams in public places, which they said often incited violence. The *Al-Sudan* newspaper reported that the minister said "destructive ideologies ha[d] entered the country through religious forums and posed a serious security threat," and that the country has many mosques, making it unnecessary to preach in public places. To support his point, the minister said 137 Sudanese individuals had joined extremist organizations such as Boko Haram and ISIS and that there had been 181 criminal cases of clashes due to inflammatory language between Wahhabi and Sufi groups.

There were reports government security services closely monitored mosques.

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 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 were not required to attend those classes.

According to various church representatives, the government skewed its decisions on permit issuance towards mosques. Some churches reported they were less willing to apply for land permits or to construct churches given the government's previous repeated denials. The government attributed its denial of permits to the churches not meeting government population density parameters and zoning plans. Local parishioners reported that, compared to Islamic institutions, Christian places of worship were disproportionately affected by zoning changes, closures, and demolitions. The government said places of worship that were demolished or closed 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.

The authorities reportedly demolished two churches (one Catholic and one Presbyterian) in Soba County of Khartoum State in December, stating the churches were on publicly-owned land.

In December the government issued a written notice to the Soba County Sudan Church of Christ stating it had no legal right to the land on which the church was built in 1986. The Sudanese Council of Churches (SCC) and lawyers appealed on behalf of the churches. At year's end, Soba County Sudan Church of Christ had not been demolished.

In July authorities in East Nile State ordered officials overseeing land matters to issue demolition notices to 25 churches in the state. At year's end, none of the churches had yet been demolished.

In July authorities gave three churches in Haj Yousif in Khartoum State notice of imminent demolition, saying the churches had improper land registration documents. Residents of the area reported that multiple mosques and a government-run school within the same vicinity as the churches were not given similar notices of imminent demolition. Pro bono legal representatives of the churches and the SCC appealed to the MGE on behalf of the churches, which all had informal documents showing the government allocated land to them for rent in the 1990s. As of the end of the year, the churches had not been demolished and the church's legal representative brought a civil case against the government, which has not yet been heard by the administrative court.

Neither the Evangelical Lutheran Church nor the Sudanese Church of Christ in Omdurman, which were demolished in October 2015, received compensation as of the end of the year. According to authorities, the government would provide financial compensation and new land in another area of Khartoum to the Evangelical Lutheran Church and other institutions affected by rezoning.

Evangelical Protestant groups cited as longstanding problems the continued sale of churches' land to investors and what they said was an ongoing lack of protection by the government for clergy and Christian parishioners arrested and detained.

As of the end of the year, the government had not implemented a 2015 court decision stipulating that only a SPECS-appointed entity may govern the land affairs of the SPECS Bahri Evangelical Church in Khartoum, and not the government-appointed Evangelical Community Council, which continued to sell the church's land to private investors throughout the year.

In a related event on July 7, police arrested 17 individuals for protesting the Evangelical Community Council's sale of the SPECS-owned Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Training School, part of the same land dispute in which a court ruled in favor of SPECS in 2015. Police subsequently released three of them, reportedly upon recognizing them as members of the council. The general prosecutor initially charged the other 14 with disturbing the peace and ordered their release on bail. Local police challenged instructions to release the group but released them three days later. On July 10, a judge found 13 of them guilty of disturbing the peace and fined them 300 SDG (\$42) each. In addition to disturbing the peace, the fourteenth defendant was found guilty of obstructing the police and fined an additional 500 SDG (\$70). Two of the convicted were members of the clergy, one was the former headmistress of the school whom the government had forcibly removed, and the remaining were senior members of SPECS. Parishioners said the arrests were a continuation of government interference in church affairs and reported that the Evangelical Community Council held elections in April and pledged to continue selling off parts of the church's property. As of the end of the year, court orders cancelling investors' claim to church property sold by the council were still pending, portions of the church remained closed, and the church had not received any compensation for demolitions in 2015.

According to media, NISS authorities raided the SPECS-owned Evangelical Basic School in Madani, Al Jazirah State on three separate occasions: September 5, October 4, and October 24. On September 5, police reportedly presented documents ordering the school be handed over to the MGE and temporarily arrested the school's headmaster, Reverend Samuel Suleiman Angelo, and 12 teachers, accusing them of supporting a rebel group in the Nuba Mountains. Suleiman strongly denied the charge. Following the October 4 raid, authorities arrested and detained for four days Suleiman, Reverend Ismail Zakaria, and seven teachers for attempting to prevent the seizure of the school. Following the October 24 raid, school officials wrote a letter to the government requesting it reconsider its decision to close the school. After hearings on November 7 and 8, the Appeal Court for Administrative Affairs cancelled an order by the Madani commissioner calling for the closure of the school and appointment of a Muslim headmaster.

As of year's end, the case of the government's closure of the Khartoum Cultural Center of the Pentecostal Church in 2014 remained pending before the Constitutional Court. The government maintained control of the property and church leaders were only permitted to use the center for administrative purposes.

The Church of Jesus Christ in Aliza, Khartoum North, continued to seek restitution for the government's demolition of its church in 2014 due to what the MGE said was lack of proper land permits and registration. According to the SCC, the church had not received compensation and authorities prevented them from constructing a new church.

The government restricted some religiously based political parties, including the Republican Brothers Party.

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.

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

In September the government engaged civil society and political parties in a Community Dialogue, a forum for participation from civil society and political parties running parallel to the National Dialogue to consider future political reforms, including whether changes to the INC should be secular or based on sharia. Authorities recurrently extended the National Dialogue from January to September, 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. Many evangelical Christian groups and other civil society groups reported not being included in either dialogue.

The MGE said decisions regarding the approval and oversight of the administration of religious institutions should be considered a federal (not state) competency, in order to better control the activities of violent extremist groups. Some Salafist groups reported plans to file a case against the MGE regarding the issue.

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 authorities required them 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.

Leading officials from various churches 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. This reportedly had a particularly negative impact on the Catholic Church whose clergy are mostly of foreign origin, while most clergy of other Christian denominations are ethnically Sudanese. The government only granted residence permits with less than a year's validity. According to Catholic Church officials, the government tightened restrictions on the entry of foreign clergy during the year. In rare cases when entry visas were issued, clergy often waited up to seven months before the government granted them residency permits. Until issuance, clergy were required to pay a 40 SDG (\$5.60) fine for every day they were not in residency status, approximately 8,400 SDG (\$1,180) over seven months.

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.

A small number of Christian politicians, the majority of whom were members of the Coptic Church, continued to hold seats in the government. Evangelical Christian groups said that the MGE-appointed director of church affairs remained a Muslim, reporting that his policies and interests were often not in alignment with those of evangelical churches.

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

Government officials reported 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 on religious grounds and because some advocated violence. Some groups said that, by allowing the largest of these Salafist groups, the Ansari al-Sunna, to operate without much surveillance or interference, the government gave tacit approval to the organization's views.

The local newspaper *Al-Sayha* reported imams and clerics launched severe criticism against the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), an armed rebel movement based in South Kordofan, which militarily controls the area where the predominantly Christian population of the Nuba Mountains resides. Imams and clerics reportedly described the movement as a “claw for Zionism seeking to destroy Islam.” In November an imam said in a Friday sermon that the SPLM-N is “fighting for apostasy.” Another imam said the SPLM-N is “calling for the disablement of Allah's rule” in the country and demanded that its “voice, which mocks sharia, be silenced.”

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, was mandated to advise the MGE and sought to encourage interfaith dialogue. During the year, however, the Council was mainly inactive.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In high-level meetings, U.S. Department of State officials, including the U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, encouraged the government to respect religious freedom and protect the rights of minority religious groups. The Special Envoy raised in high-level government meetings the nine-month detention of Hassan Abdelrahim and other clergy by the NISS without charges and urged the government to grant a fair and speedy trial. Government officials responded it was a criminal case, requiring the trial to be completed just as any other.

U.S. embassy representatives stressed respect for religious freedom was crucial to improved bilateral relations. In March 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 urged the minister to repeal apostasy and blasphemy laws and expressed concern about specific cases that had come to the embassy's attention, especially the cases of detained clergy, the enforcement of public order laws, and the demolition of churches.

In a meeting in September the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom raised concerns with the undersecretary of the MFA about ongoing cases, and underscored U.S. commitment to engaging with the government to improve religious freedom.

Embassy officials met regularly with imams and Sufi clerics, and clergy and parishioners of Catholic and Protestant churches to hear their views on the religious freedom situation in the country. 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. In one example, embassy officials regularly attended weekly hearings from August to November in the trial of Peter Jasek and associates, Pastors Kowa Shamal and Hassan Abdelrahim, and human rights activist Abdelmoneim Abdumaula. Embassy officials also attended ongoing proceedings for the 25 Muslims charged with apostasy in 2015 and released on bail in February.

Embassy officials kept in close contact with NGOs, civil society representatives, and journalists to gather their perspectives on religious freedom and to receive updates about ongoing cases.

The embassy regularly utilized its social media outlets to share articles and messaging related to religious tolerance and freedom. Often the messaging highlighted religious diversity in the United States and efforts by local communities to remain inclusive and maintain an open dialogue. In addition, the embassy issued statements in observance of both Christian and Islamic holidays.

Since 1999, Sudan has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. On October 31, 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 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.