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SUDAN Mounting concerns regarding imminent adoption of entirely Shari'a constitution as pressure on churches intensifies

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has expressed concern regarding the implications of an entirely Shari'a-based constitution on freedom of worship in the Republic of Sudan, in the wake of increasing pressure on churches in the area since the creation of South Sudan on July 9, 2011.

On October 12, President Omar Al-Bashir announced that the Republic of Sudan would soon adopt an entirely Islamic constitution, enshrining Shari'a as the main source of Sudanese legislation. The announcement comes against the backdrop of an intensification of pressure on churches in the north following creation of South Sudan on July 9, 2011.

In a speech to students in Khartoum, Al-Bashir said, "Ninety eight percent of the people are Muslims and the new constitution will reflect this. The official religion will be Islam and Islamic law the main source." The announcement reinforces a similar statement made on December 19, 2010, in which Al-Bashir had warned that, "If south Sudan secedes, we will change the constitution and at that time there will be no time to speak of diversity of culture and ethnicity... Shari'a and Islam will be the main source for the constitution, Islam the official religion and Arabic the official language."

In theory, Sudan's current constitution provides for freedom of religion, recognizing in Article 1 that the state is "multi-religious". The pending removal of this acknowledgement has led to increased concerns for the future of more than a million largely non-Muslim southerners, who still live in the north, and also for northerners who are non-Muslim.

A recent increase in threats to churches and church leaders in the north underpins fears for the future of Christians in Sudan. Numerous reports from South Kordofan have indicated that Christians, especially Christian leaders, have been targeted by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) since violence broke out in June 2011. On July 18, the Anglican Bishop of Kadugli and two other clergymen who were meeting at his home narrowly escaped injury when it came under attack by assailants who left threatening letters. During July and August, ten church leaders in Khartoum are reported to have received threatening text messages warning of imminent attacks aimed at creating a "purely Islamic state". According to Compass Direct, on September 11 officials from the Ministry of Physical Planning and Public Utilities in Khartoum State threatened to demolish three church buildings in Omdurman if worship services continued, claiming that the land on which the buildings stand belongs to the government.

Meanwhile, a broader crackdown on freedoms is underway, with hundreds of members of opposition party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), arrested in late September, while newspapers have been banned from reporting statements from leaders of the SPLM-N or Darfur rebel groups.

Other political parties in Sudan are renewing their calls for the formation of a national government. The leader of prominent opposition group the National Umma Party (NUP), Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, said that the new constitution

should be formed by a national government or a government of technocrats as opposed to the current government, which is dominated by Al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP).

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned at the announcement that the Republic of Sudan will soon adopt a new constitution that will further limit the rights and freedoms of the country's non-Muslim citizens. As the northern economy has weakened, the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) appears to have reverted to its Islamist and Arabist roots in an effort to maintain power, and has sought to divert attention from its failures by launching a brutal campaign of aerial and ground warfare aimed primarily at civilians in the border regions of Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile State. It is deeply unfortunate for the people of Sudan that the ruling regime has learned nothing from years of fruitless warfare, and refuses to acknowledge that the creation of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state in which the rights of civil society are respected is the best guarantee for the peace and prosperity of the nation."

Notes to Editors:

1. Fears for Southerners living in the north were already high following a refusal by Khartoum to grant dual-citizenship to Southern Sudanese, announced in July 2011, in contrast to the Republic of South Sudan, which granted dual-citizenship to residents of northern birth.