



SUDAN

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Sudan has existed in its present form since July 2011, following the independence of South Sudan. Since then, the situation for religious minorities in Sudan has become critical. Over 97% of those living in Sudan are Muslim. Not only are Christians in Sudan obstructed from practising their faith, they are often actively persecuted for doing so. Both blasphemy and apostasy (leaving a religion: in this case, Islam) are illegal, with the latter carrying the ultimate penalty. Christians are prohibited from holding open air meetings, and violence against those identifying themselves as Christian is common.

The problems experienced by religious minorities predate South Sudan's secession in 2011. Successive governments have been hostile to religious and ethnic minorities, particularly since the shari'a declaration of 1983. Decades of discrimination and violence played a decisive role in causing the South (which contains large Christian, animist and non-Arab communities) to separate from the predominantly Muslim and Arabised North. President al-Bashir repeatedly stated that following southern independence, Sudan would become an Islamic state with a new shari'a-based constitution, which is in the process of being drafted in an opaque and non-inclusive manner. Since the 2011 secession, religious minorities have experienced even greater hardship, hostility, and isolation, and diverse forms of governmental and societal repression.

BLASPHEMY AND APOSTASY

Both blasphemy and apostasy are illegal. According to Article 126 of the 1991 Sudanese Penal Code, an apostate includes anyone "who propagates for renunciation of the creed of Islam or publicly declares his renouncement thereof by an express statement or conclusive act." Those found guilty of either propagating or renouncing are given an opportunity to repent and can face execution

if they fail to do so. Since 2011, the number of people charged with apostasy has risen exponentially; many of those charged are from Darfur's Hausa tribe.

Sudan's blasphemy laws have been used by the government to effectively prevent the open preaching of any religion. Muslims have also been arrested under these laws for practising a form of Islam which differs from that of the ruling regime.

RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Holding open air meetings is not permitted. In order to assemble legally in public, permission must be obtained from the government. This permission is often denied. Furthermore, in April 2013 it was announced that no new permits would be issued for the construction of Christian churches. Consequently, the Christian community finds itself unable to express its faith publicly, or to construct new houses of worship. Several existing churches have also been destroyed, either by the state or during mob violence sanctioned by local officials.

Laws against blasphemy and apostasy, coupled with governmental and societal hostility, render converts from Islam extremely vulnerable. In late 2012, Sudan's Coptic community experienced severe repression for the first time when two priests and several adherents were detained following the conversion and brief disappearance of a woman from an allegedly 'high-ranking family'.

Over the course of 2013, reports of arrests, detentions and deportations of Christians have been widespread. The highest concentration of such incidents has been in the



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main cities of Khartoum and Omdurman. There, churches have been raided by state authorities, their assets seized and their members arrested or detained. The authorities have also closed down Christian educational institutes and harassed and arrested their employees.

Despite the increasing restraints placed on minority faiths, in a development that appears to herald further repression, the government has come under criticism from Islamic institutions that object to what they perceive as the freedom available to Christians to share their faith publicly.

STATE VIOLENCE

There are regular reports of aerial bombardment by the Sudanese Air Force in the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile. Not only are the main targets civilians of African ethnicity, these bombardments also occur in areas with a high Christian population, causing some observers to interpret this as being part of a deliberate and systemic attempt to remove Christianity from Sudan. This impression has been heightened by reports of Sudanese Christians being forced to flee following intimidation or threats of arrest or death.

In May 2011, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) invaded the disputed Abyei area. A plebiscite on Abyei's future had been postponed due to a disagreement over voter eligibility. After three days of fighting, 5,000 SAF soldiers took over the area, destroying homes and farmland and causing civilians to flee. A UN resolution created a demilitarised zone, and ongoing negotiations resulted in agreement for an October 2013 referendum. However, the dispute over the eligibility of voters remained unresolved. On 31 October, 98% of registered Ngok Dinka voters participated in an unofficial vote, termed the 'Peoples' Referendum', which was organised by the Ngok Dinka General Conference, and 99.9% of participants voted to join with South Sudan.

CHRONIC HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

A strong correlation exists between ethnicity and religion, with the vast majority of those professing the Christian faith being of African rather than Arab or Arabised ethnicity. Although much of the violence in Sudan appears explicitly directed at those with a particular set of beliefs, ethnic overtones are also apparent. For instance, those belonging to African ethnic groups, such as the Nuba and certain Darfuri tribes, have been systematically targeted regardless of religion. In this way, religious and ethnic issues in Sudan are often two sides of the same coin.

The government makes extensive use of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and other security agencies to severely restrict the civil and political rights of its citizens. Political factions within the country that support the separation of religion and state, or advocating a pluralistic federal system, have been harassed and arrested for their views. Civil society continues to experience rigorous suppression; arbitrary detention is rife, human rights defenders are harassed and arrested routinely, press freedom is curtailed severely, and protests are met with an extremely heavy-handed response, including live ammunition. Moreover, officials involved in violations can do so with impunity due to the 2010 National Security Act and other laws that effectively grant them immunity.

Another pertinent issue is women's rights. Under the current penal code, conduct or clothing that is deemed to offend 'public decency' is punishable by up to 40 lashes, while adultery carries a possible death sentence. Non-Muslim women are also subjected to these punishments. Gender-related violence, such as physical abuse and rape, is also widely reported, particularly in Darfur, where displaced women and girls have been targeted for sexual violence by government-allied militias and soldiers since war broke out in 2003.

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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