



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **91.3%**
- Christians : **4.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **2.7%**
- Others : **1.1%**

41,176,000

1,886,068 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Known as the “Interim National Constitution”, Sudan’s temporary constitution remains in place years after the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the creation of the independent state of South Sudan in 2011. The central position of ethnic and religious diversity in Sudan is set out in the preamble and article 1. Religious rights are spelt out in detail in article 6.^[1]

The sombre political atmosphere following the establishment of South Sudan has resulted in a shift towards less religious tolerance. This change in attitude is reflected primarily in the behaviour of rulers and politicians^[2], though recent constitutional amendments award the National Intelligence and Security Services extended powers which could be used to limit freedom of religion in Sudan.^[3]

Despite the right to religious freedom expressed in the constitution, issues including conversion, apostasy, blasphemy, proselytism and other “religious offences” are very much areas of concern for the government and legislators of Sudan. Penalties for blasphemy under the criminal code have been recently increased.^[4] Apostasy, conversion to Islam, religious discrimination and other areas of religious controversy rarely reach a constitutional court; they are rather handled by subordinate levels of judicature and they are tried in accordance with laws and practices based on Islamic jurisprudence.^[5] This leaves those suspected of acting against Islamic norms largely unprotected in legal terms, with little access to impartial courts of law.

The Ministry of Education requires a minimum of 15 students in any class providing Christian instruction. Since the establishment of South Sudan, this number is rarely attained, so Christian students have to resort to extra-curricular religious instruction provided by their own churches.^[6] There is the suspicion that the regime exploits internal divisions or dissident tendencies within minority religious groups in order to weaken consolidated churches and congregations,

particularly in the case of conflicts related to church-owned real estate assets.^[7]

Sudan has often been defined as a “militia state”, notorious for the expedite arrest of citizens on charges including indecency and disturbance of public order, charges easily made against individuals considered a threat to the government such as political dissidents, activists, journalists, religious or political leaders, etc. Armed forces and security agencies have often been accused of arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, torture and ill-treatment of detainees^[8] Violations of human rights seem particularly flagrant in those regions still affected by armed conflict, namely Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile.

Sudan has strong ties to Salafist jihadi groups linked to Al-Qaida or the Islamic State. They have freedom of action and unhindered access to media.^[9]

Human rights organisations confirm that the government of Sudan continues to discriminate and oppress groups on religious grounds,^[10] as though they were a threat to social cohesion or security. Frequently targeted are members of Christian churches based in the Nuba Mountains, a disputed region populated by insurgency groups demanding independence. Some Muslim groups, especially Shia and Qurʾanist congregations, are also under the close surveillance of security agencies.^[11] On a positive note, in April 2018, apparently due to external and internal pressure, President Al-Bashir issued a public order releasing political detainees.^[12]

In July 2017 the Ministry of Education of Khartoum state issued an order preventing Christian schools from holding classes on Saturdays and imposing on them the “Muslim weekend” of Friday and Saturday opposed to the usual weekend of Friday and Sunday permitted hitherto in such educational institutions.^[13] Despite objections from different Christian groups, this regulation continues, disrupting the timetable of many Church schools.

This and some other issues related to religious freedom were broached during the visit of the US Deputy Secretary of State, John Sullivan, in November 2017.^[14] This visit took place soon after the historical lifting of US sanctions on Sudan on 6th October 2017, bringing to an end a 20-year period of embargo, and after the current US administration eliminated Sudan from the list of countries affected by travel restrictions into US Territory.^[15]

In March 2018, the president of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church flew to Khartoum and met with government officials to thank them for their official recognition of the Adventist Church.^[16] Entry visas to Christian missionaries have been issued more generously than in the years previous to 2017.^[17]

Incidents

In August 2016 Sudan's criminal court opened a case against three pastors (two Sudanese and one Czech national) and one Sudanese activist, charged with conspiracy against the state, espionage and entering/photographing military areas.^[18] This case was adjourned several times and on 29th January 2017, the activist and one pastor were sentenced to 12 years imprisonment; the other Sudanese had been released previously while the Czech pastor was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was pardoned and released by the Government one month later, while the other two co-convicted were pardoned in May 2017.^[19]

Dr Mudawi Ibrahim, a renowned and internationally recognised human rights activist, founder and former director of the Sudan Social Development Organisation (SUDO), was arrested on 7th December 2016, charged with several acts against the state and the constitutional order. His arrest came at a time when 23 other opposition activists were also imprisoned. After several delays of his court case, all charges against him were dropped. He was pardoned and released in August 2017.^[20]

Early in 2017, Christian leaders complained to the government about anti-Christian posters printed by radical Muslim groups and posted in different parts of the capital promoting a boycott on Christian celebrations.^[21]

In February 2017, the Sudanese government announced its intention to demolish 25 churches. The Sudanese

government was questioned about this by an EU representative.^[22]

As a result of an internal wrangle concerning Church-owned real state, a Church elder trying to prevent some women from being beaten was stabbed to death in April 2017.^[23]

Two offices and a temple belonging to the Sudan Church of Christ, mainly attended by Christians from the Nuba Mountains, were destroyed on 7th May 2017 in the Soba Aradi district of Khartoum.^[24]

A man who requested to be registered as “non-religious” rather than “Muslim” at the civil registry was arrested under the legislation on apostasy (Article 126 of the Sudanese Criminal Code). He was later released on the grounds that he was “mentally incompetent to stand trial”.^[25]

Two pastors belonging to the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church were evicted from their homes in Omdurman in August 2017.^[26]

A Church belonging to the Sudanese Church of Christ in Al-Thawra was closed and five persons affiliated with it arrested in October 2017.^[27]

An Evangelical church in Al Hajj Jousif, a suburb of Khartoum, was destroyed in February 2018 despite documents that showed it had been in Church ownership since 1989.^[28]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Comprehensive sanctions against the country were lifted at the end of 2017 and Sudanese citizens can travel again without undue restrictions. Having survived a 20-year embargo, Sudan is now extremely eager to be removed from the US list of countries supporting international terrorism. The West may exploit the possibility of this change in status to force the Sudanese regime to grant broader freedoms to its citizens and bring about social and legal changes to enable religious, cultural and political diversity within society.^[29]

Should the US and the international community succeed in implementing an effective monitoring on the performance of civil freedoms, and should they be capable of applying diplomatic and political pressure on the government, some positive developments might materialise. Otherwise, given the history and the defiant character of the Sudanese government, it is unlikely that the regime will bring about any significant improvements regarding violations of religious freedom in Sudan.

Endnotes / Sources

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cf. Dr. Suliman Baldo, 'Radical Intolerance: Sudan's Religious Oppression and Embrace of Extremist Groups', Report by Enough Project, https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/SudanReligiousFreedom_Enough_Dec2017_final.pdf, 12th December 2017, page 6 (accessed 6th May 2018).

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