

SOUTH SUDAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The transitional constitution stipulates separation of religion and state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides religious groups freedom to worship and assemble, organize themselves, teach, own property, receive financial contributions, communicate and issue publications on religious matters, and establish charitable institutions. In connection with the continuing civil conflict, government and opposition forces reportedly engaged in killings of religious workers, including the killing of five churchgoers by government forces in January. On November 11, army and local police in Tonj State reportedly arrested and physically mistreated at least 150 members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The members were released on November 18 after Tonj State Governor Akech Tong Aleu intervened. On March 13, opposition forces in Unity State temporarily detained eight religious aid workers affiliated with Samaritan's Purse, a U.S.-based, nondenominational evangelical Christian relief organization. In connection with the civil conflict, government and opposition forces continued to loot and burn down churches and religious centers, including the Catholic diocesan pastoral center in Lutaya, which was burned by the army in January. Religious leaders reported the government shut down some Catholic radio programs in its efforts to censor media programs critical of the government.

St. Mary's Cathedral in Wau sheltered more than 10,000 residents fleeing intense fighting in the town in April. Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly in connection with peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. The South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) issued a statement in August condemning continued violence in the country and emphasized a return to the "path of dialogue."

U.S. embassy officials met with Advisor on Islamic Affairs Sheikh Juma Saaed Ali in November to discuss the Muslim community's role, challenges, and outreach in the country's peacebuilding process. The U.S. Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with religious leaders and civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13 million (July 2017 estimate). The majority of the population is Christian. The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report from 2010 estimated Christians make up 60.5 percent of the population, indigenous religions 32.9 percent, and Muslims 6.2 percent. Other religious groups with small populations include the Bahai Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism.

According to the SSCC and the government Bureau of Religious Affairs, the groups that make up the majority of Christians are the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and African Inland Churches. Smaller populations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. Many of those who adhere to indigenous religious beliefs reside in isolated parts of the country; a substantial part of the population in these areas also combines Christian and indigenous practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The transitional constitution stipulates separation of religion and state. It prohibits religious discrimination, even if the president declares a state of emergency. It states that all religions are to be treated equally and that religion should not be used for divisive purposes.

The transitional constitution provides for the right of religious groups to worship or assemble freely in connection with any religion or belief, solicit and receive voluntary financial contributions, own property for religious purposes, and establish places of worship. The transitional constitution also provides religious groups the freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications; communicate with individuals and communities in matters of religion at both the national and international levels; teach religion in places "suitable" for these purposes; train, appoint, elect, or designate by succession their religious leaders; and observe religious holidays.

The government requires religious groups to register with the state government and the Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. Faith-based organizations are required to provide their constitution; a statement of faith documenting their doctrines, beliefs, objectives, and holy book;

a list of executive members; and a registration fee of \$3,500 (which is charged for all organizations, including faith-based ones). This requirement, however, was not strictly enforced, and many churches operated without registration. International faith-based organizations are required also to provide a copy of a previous registration with another government and a letter from the international organization commissioning its activities in the country.

The transitional constitution specifies the regulation of religious matters within each state is the executive and legislative responsibility of the state government. It establishes the responsibility of government at all levels to protect monuments and places of religious importance from destruction or desecration.

The transitional constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain “appropriate” faith-based charitable or humanitarian institutions.

The transitional constitution guarantees every citizen access to education without discrimination based on religion.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On November 11, army and local police in Tonj State reportedly arrested and physically mistreated at least 150 members of the local Seventh-day Adventist Church. The members were released on November 18 after Tonj State Governor Akech Tong Aleu summoned Akop County Commissioner Lino Dut Awech and intervened. Media sources and human rights activists reported members of the congregation were harassed, beaten, forced to drink alcohol and smoke tobacco, and denied food and water for three days. A church leader stated he believed the Akop county commissioner ordered the detention of parishioners, reportedly responding to complaints from local chiefs and traditional spiritual leaders known as “spear masters,” for not attending a November 4 youth meeting. The church leader said he could not attend because he was participating in a Sabbath religious service, and he added that traditional chiefs were upset that the Seventh-day Adventist Church converted their sons and daughters to a new religion. The spear masters and traditional chiefs reportedly threatened to kill Seventh-day Adventist members if the church reopened. Religious leaders and human rights activists characterized this as an isolated occurrence.

There were continued reports that in connection with the civil conflict, security forces, opposition forces, and armed militias affiliated with the government and the opposition committed killings and other abuses against civilians, including religious aid workers and churchgoers. On March 13, opposition forces in Unity State temporarily detained eight religious aid workers affiliated with Samaritan's Purse, a U.S.-based evangelical Christian relief organization, and later released them.

In February media sources reported government forces threatened employees of a church bookstore in Juba. Soldiers allegedly removed books they declared critical of the government.

Government and opposition forces reportedly looted or burned down churches and religious centers in various towns around the country, including the Catholic diocesan pastoral center in Lutaya, which Catholic media stated was burned by the army in January. Separately, religious leaders reported the government shut down some Catholic radio programs in its efforts to censor media programs critical of the government.

On March 10, President Salva Kiir held a National Day of Prayer where he asked for "God's forgiveness and guidance." Some religious leaders criticized the commemoration, with Catholic Archbishop of Juba Paulino Lukudu Loro calling the event a "political prayer" and "a mockery" amid conflict-related abuses committed by government forces.

Both a Christian representative and a Muslim representative read prayers at most official events, with the government often providing translation from English to Arabic.

Several religious groups were represented in government positions. President Kiir, a Catholic, employed a high-level advisor on religious affairs, Sheikh Juma Saaed Ali, a leader of the Islamic community in the country. Additional Muslim representation in government included at least one governor and 14 members of the 400-member Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA). All principal religious groups were represented in the TNLA.

Although not mandated by the government, religious education was generally included in public secondary school and university curricula. Theoretically, students could attend either a Christian or an Islamic course, and those with no

religious affiliation could choose between the two courses. Because of resource constraints, however, some schools only offered education in one course. Christian and Muslim private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government interference.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated activities, particularly around peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. The SSCC, in implementing its Action Plan for Peace, held a series of community-level dialogues throughout the country aimed at facilitating mutual understanding and respect among various groups, including religious groups. According to observers, the dialogues were well received and enjoyed wide participation among various faiths and ethnic groups. The SSCC and the Islamic Council served as hubs for coordination of the peacebuilding events. Churches were often used as shelters for those seeking to escape violence. For example, St. Mary's Cathedral in Wau sheltered more than 10,000 residents fleeing intense fighting in the town in April.

Religious leaders worked together across denominations to advance peace. The SSCC issued a statement in August condemning continued violence in the country and emphasized a return to the "path of dialogue." Christian and Muslim leaders expressed their willingness to assist with the peacebuilding process. In May Pope Francis canceled plans to visit during the year due to security concerns.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with Advisor on Islamic Affairs Sheikh Juma Saaed Ali in November to discuss the Muslim community's engagement in the peacebuilding process. The U.S. Ambassador regularly participated in discussions in Juba with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, South Sudan Council of Churches, Episcopal Church of Sudan, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and Catholic Church on faith-based peace initiatives, implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, and religious tolerance. Embassy officials expressed concern to faith-based leaders regarding conflict-related violence and the recent detention and mistreatment of Seventh-day Adventist churchgoers in Tonj State.