

SOUTH SUDAN 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The transitional constitution provides for 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 October, a member of the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) ordered the burning of a Seventh-day Adventist church in Warrap State. In March, South Sudan People's Defense Force (SSPDF) troops occupied a church in Central Equatoria State belonging to a detained pastor who had posted a prediction on social media that the President and First Vice President would be removed from office. Authorities had arrested the pastor in July 2021 and held him in prison for more than a year without charges before bringing charges on September 30. In January, an ongoing conflict between two rival Episcopalian factions in Jonglei State resulted in gunmen attacking the Archbishop of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan (ECSS), as well as two of his colleagues at St. Peter Church in the state capital. Youth militia loyal to a rival Episcopalian faction who stated they believed they were the rightful leaders of the Episcopalian Church in Jonglei State carried out the attack, the third since early 2021. Senior members of the government ordered the leaders of the opposing groups to travel to Juba, the seat of the ECSS, to resolve the internal church leadership conflict.

In March, the government charged a Catholic priest and five other men with conspiring in the 2021 attempted killing of an Italian priest nominated by the Vatican to be bishop of Rumbek. Police arrested the priest and the other individuals, and following the trial, the Juba High Court sentenced four persons to prison terms ranging from four to seven years. Two of the six individuals arrested were released. Media reported a number of attacks on clerics, including the

killing of a church elder and the destruction of several religious buildings, in ethnic clashes in Aneet market on the border of Abyei Special Administrative Area and Warrap State, and the attempted killing of the Archbishop of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan in Jonglei State. In both instances, religious organizations sought to work in partnership with state and local government authorities to create dialogues and peace-building initiatives within impacted communities to resolve ethnic and inter-denominational tensions. The country's religious institutions remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations frequently provided noncombatants shelter from subnational conflicts throughout the country. For example, local and international Catholic and Protestant organizations provided assistance to internally displaced persons (IDP) fleeing continued violence in Upper Nile and Unity States at the UN Malakal Protection of Civilians site and at the Bentiu IDP camp.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials repeatedly raised concerns with government representatives regarding a lack of the rule of law, increasing subnational conflict, impunity for violent crimes, and reports of human rights abuses and their impact on religious workers. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives promoted religious freedom through discussions and outreach with religious leaders and civil society organizations and ongoing series of religious leader roundtables hosted by the Ambassador starting in August.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.5 million (midyear 2022). The 2020 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project report estimated that Christians make up 60.5 percent of the population; followers of indigenous (animist) religions, 32.9 percent; and Muslims, 6.2 percent. Other religious groups with small populations include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. The country's massive population displacement resulting from nearly a decade of conflict, as well as a large population of pastoralists who

regularly migrate within and between countries, make it difficult to accurately estimate the overall population and its religious demography.

According to the South Sudan Council of Churches and the government Bureau of Religious Affairs, the principal Christian denominations are Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and African Inland Churches. Smaller congregations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. Adherents of Indigenous religious traditions reside throughout the country and practice their Indigenous religions concurrently with Christianity and Islam.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The transitional constitution stipulates the 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, extended in September to run through February 2025, 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 on matters of religion at both the national and international levels; teach religion in places "suitable" for this purpose; 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 where they operate. Religious groups with associated advocacy and humanitarian or development organizations must also register with 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 (\$5) (which all humanitarian organizations must pay, including faith-based ones). This requirement, however, is not strictly enforced, and many churches operate 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 that 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 what the transitional constitution deems “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

In October, a member of the TNLA ordered local youth to burn a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church in Gogrial East County, Warrap State. The TNLA member

stated SDA doctrine was destroying traditional and cultural norms within the community. Following the incident, the parliamentarian made public statements in the press justifying his actions and calling the SDA church a “house of prostitution,” claiming the church was abducting women and girls from the community.

In March, SSPDF troops occupied a church in Yei River County, Central Equatoria State, to prevent congregants from gathering to worship. The church was home to pastor Abraham Chol Maketh, head of the Cush International Church, an evangelical Christian group. Chol Maketh was arrested by police alongside two congregants in July 2021 for posting a video on social media predicting President Salva Kiir Mayardit and First Vice President Riek Machar would be removed from office on the country’s tenth independence anniversary in July 2021. The three men were held in prison without trial or charges until September 30, 2022. Authorities charged the men with inciting the public to provoke organized forces against the government in violation of the penal code. As of year’s end, the trial was ongoing.

Following an outbreak of ethnic clashes in Warrap State during which rival armed youth militias destroyed a number of houses of worship and caused the displacement of approximately 70,000 noncombatants, the President formed a committee to investigate the incident in April. Following its investigation, in May, the committee provided recommendations to resolve the conflict between the two communities, including community dialogue, with the participation of religious leaders.

In January, the Archbishop of the ECSS and two colleagues were attacked at St. Peter Church in Bor, Jonglei State, by youth gunmen loyal to a rival Episcopalian faction. All three survived the attempted killing without injury. The attackers also caused property damage to the church and nearby vehicles. The incident was linked to a continuing dispute within the ECSS in Jonglei State in which local populations clashed with each other and the Church’s hierarchy after the defrocking of an Episcopal bishop in 2020. This was the third attack on the

premises since 2020 between factions claiming to represent the Episcopal Church in Bor. Government officials ordered the rival bishops to leave Bor and return to Juba and called on the ECSS to resolve the issue.

Religious leaders continued to say they generally had good access to transitional government officials and that their relationship with authorities remained broadly positive. Both Christian and Islamic prayers were given to open most official events, with the transitional government often providing translation from English to Arabic. Religious leaders expressed concern the continued breakdown in law and order increased the risk of harm to all entities operating in the country.

Government officials included both Christians and Muslims. President Salva Kiir Mayardit, a Catholic, employed Sheikh Juma Saeed Ali, a leader of the country's Muslim community, as a high-level advisor on religious affairs. One of the Vice Presidents, Hussein Abdelbagi, was also a Muslim. Although not mandated, 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 offered only one course. Christian and Muslim private religious schools set their own religious curriculum without government mandates on content. Seventh-day Adventists noted the University of Juba often failed to provide reasonable accommodation for Adventist students unable to take exams on Saturdays.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, a church elder was killed and several religious buildings destroyed in ethnic clashes in Aneet market on the border of the disputed region of Abyei and Twic County, Warrap State. The attack by Twic Dinka youth militias on Ngok Dinka youth militias occupying the Aneet market was motivated by ethnic rivalry over control of the market, according to government officials, human rights organizations, and local press. In what was described as an attempt to push the Ngok Dinka from the market, Twic armed factions destroyed Pentecostal and

Sudan Presbyterian and Evangelical churches and a mosque, and partially destroyed an Episcopal and a Catholic church. At least 15 civilians died in the attack and approximately 70,000 were displaced from the area.

In March, the government charged a priest and five other men with conspiring in the 2021 attempted killing of an Italian priest chosen by the Vatican to become bishop of the Diocese of Rumbek in Lakes State. In April, the Juba High Court sentenced the priest to seven years in prison for conspiring to commit murder, two other men to five years for carrying out the attack, and a fourth individual to four years for hiding evidence. The men were all charged under the relevant articles of the penal code. The wounded priest was evacuated to Nairobi, Kenya, and the attack forced the rescheduling of his consecration as bishop. The police arrested multiple suspects following the attack; two were subsequently released for lack of evidence. According to media reporting and court proceedings, the convicted priest was serving as the Diocesan Coordinator of the Rumbek diocese when the bishop was appointed.

The country's religious institutions remained a crucial source of stability in an otherwise unstable country, according to religious and human rights organizations. Christian and Muslim religious leaders regularly communicated and coordinated their activities, particularly around peace building, and humanitarian aid. Religious leaders stated that a diverse network of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim domestic and international organizations frequently provided noncombatants shelter from various subnational conflicts throughout the country. Observers said that at times, religious workers became targets for speaking out about what they believed to be the underlying causes of the conflict.

Leaders from all major religious groups attended ceremonial public events, and both Christian and Muslim leaders were represented on key peace agreement implementation bodies that met throughout the year. Additionally, the lay Catholic organization Sant'Egidio formally supported the implementation of the peace agreement and engaged with nonsignatories through the Rome Talks, based on the Rome Declaration that the group facilitated. The declaration was

signed in January 2020 between the government and nonsignatory groups to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R – ARCSS). In November, the government announced its withdrawal from the Rome Talks, citing military mobilization by nonsignatory groups. Days later, representatives of Sant’Egidio traveled to the country at the invitation of the President to discuss the resumption of the talks. As of December, the resumption of the Rome Talks had not been confirmed.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officials frequently raised concerns with government representatives regarding a lack of rule of law, increasing subnational conflict, impunity for violent crimes, and reports of human rights abuses and their impact on religious workers.

The Ambassador hosted a series of religious roundtables during which embassy officials raised with religious leaders many of the same topics raised with government officials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly participated in discussions with leaders of the South Sudan Islamic Council, South Sudan Council of Churches, Episcopal Church of South Sudan, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and Catholic Church on faith-based peace initiatives, implementation of the peace agreement signed in 2018, and religious tolerance. In September, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable for Christian and Muslim leaders, highlighting U.S. government support for the role religious leaders play in peacebuilding and reconciliation. In November, he hosted a dinner for leaders from the Council of Churches, the Papal Nuncio, and visiting representatives from the Church of England and Church of Scotland to discuss collective efforts to promote peace and development in the country.