

March 20, 2012 | by [Leonard A. Leo](#) , [Felice D. Gaer](#) and [Tiffany Lynch](#) □

The following essay appeared in World Affairs Journal today. For a link to the original essay, go to <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/sudans-continuing-war-religious-freedom>.

In July 2011, South Sudan became an independent country, six years after a peace agreement ended Khartoum's 20-year war to impose on the South its extremist interpretation of Islam.

By any measure, independence was a victory for the universal human right to freedom of religion or belief. However, while South Sudan's people are finally free of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's tyranny, those remaining under his rule are not. Bashir's regime and Khartoum's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) continue to commit egregious human rights violations.

The world needs to shine a light on these abuses. The Khartoum government has launched a brutal war in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile state, bombarding its own people and denying vital humanitarian assistance. Last fall, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, visited a refugee camp in South Sudan filled with people who had fled the Nuba Mountains after being targeted based on their religious identity. Across Sudan, the government is cracking down on civil society, and arresting and frequently torturing protestors, opposition members, students, and activists.

Religious freedom violations increased substantially last year and continue to rise today. These abuses reflect a determination to enforce a narrow, rigid ideology against Sudan's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, and particularly against Christians and non-conforming Muslims. Recently, the Association of Islamic Scholars and Preachers issued a fatwa against National Umma Party leader Sadiq al-Mahdi, and urged Sudan's leaders to silence "voices" deemed "the enemies of God." Mahdi called for letting women attend marriage ceremonies as witnesses, participate in funerals, and pray in the same line as men, and argued that the hijab is not a part of Islam.

Sudan's diversity, as well as its human rights commitments, in fact is recognized in its Interim National Constitution, a component of the 2005 peace agreement ("Comprehensive Peace Agreement" or "CPA") with the South. The constitution guarantees the freedoms to worship and assemble, establish and maintain places of worship and appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions, observe days of rest, celebrate holidays and ceremonies, and communicate with co-religionists at home and abroad. While these guarantees are not fully respected in practice and often are superseded by other laws, the constitution's commitment to these principles is a vital legal protection for all citizens regardless of religious, ethnic, or political identification.

Moreover, the signing of the CPA and the conclusion of the North/South war advanced religious freedom and other pivotal rights by ending the imposition of sharia law and the attacks on churches in the Christian and animist South. During the CPA-mandated Interim Period, Khartoum actually took small steps to improve religious freedom throughout Sudan.

However, in the lead-up to the South's January 2011 referendum vote that secured independence, and continuing today, Bashir insisted that a forthcoming constitution will be based on sharia law, exclude references to Sudan's multi-religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, and roll back religious freedom guarantees. USCIRF has warned that such statements reveal the NCP's goal of foisting its versions of Arabization and Islamization upon the nation and all of its citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Much now has changed for the worse. Not only have the few gains made during the CPA Interim Period evaporated, but the kinds of violations that earlier prompted USCIRF to name

Sudan the world's worst religious freedom abuser have returned with a vengeance.

Khartoum is targeting Sudanese citizens based on their religious identity and destroying churches, particularly in the Nuba Mountains. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Popular Defense Front (PDF) again have been reportedly targeting Christian pastors and parishioners and attacking churches. In the first few days of fighting there, SAF troops destroyed four of the five churches in Kadugli. On February 1st of this year, the first day of school, the government bombed Heiban Bible College. While no one was hurt, two buildings were destroyed.

Elsewhere in Sudan, violations against Christians have multiplied. Last December, three Sudan Church of Christ members in Khartoum were detained because they were suspected of working with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N); they were released after security officers warned them to cease "Christian activities." In Khartoum, Islamist extremists threatened Christian leaders in text messages, visits, and letters. One message reportedly warned, "We want this country to be purely an Islamic state, so we must kill the infidels and destroy their churches all over Sudan." Four houses of worship were attacked, with no one held responsible.

Church leaders report that officials from the Ministry of Physical Planning and Public Utilities have threatened to demolish the Sudanese Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church of Sudan, and the Roman Catholic Church in Omdurman if they continued to conduct services. Christmas was not recognized in 2011 and the government is preventing religious communities from hosting Bible exhibitions.

Government oversight of Christianity is on the upswing. Church leaders report that Sudan's Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment ordered them to provide information about church activities and church members or face arrest. Pastors now report that they are censoring themselves and curtailing activities. This intimidation is reminiscent of the pre-CPA era when pastors were interrogated, arrested, and sometimes tried for allegedly working with the South.

In this post-CPA era, Southerners in Khartoum feel especially vulnerable. They are scheduled to lose their citizenship on April 8th, raising the specter of further government harassment and expulsion. Christian leaders report that Southern Christians fear for their lives and are not attending services or are fleeing to the South.

Also worrisome is a renewed focus on apostasy, a capital crime. The last time Khartoum arrested and charged anyone with apostasy was in 1998, but last year, the government arrested nearly 170 people under this charge. According to the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, more than 150 of them were arrested in July, and 129 were formally charged. Their "crime" was practicing a version of Islam which differed from that of the ruling NCP. They were released in September, but only after renouncing their faith and agreeing to follow the regime's interpretation of Islam. ACJPS also reported that in a separate incident in September, the government charged another 18 individuals with apostasy. Last May, Sudanese intelligence officers arrested Hawa Abdulla Muhammad Saleh, a Christian, for apostasy, proselytizing, "Christianization of minors," and other crimes.

Along with the international community, the United States should tell Sudan that the status quo is utterly unacceptable. In oil negotiations with South Sudan, Bashir's government has committed theft and demanded exorbitant fees for pipeline usage, demonstrating that it cannot be trusted to do the right thing without intense public pressure. This is why, until Sudan's leaders take concrete steps to end their war against religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, the United States should continue to apply economic sanctions, travel bans, and asset freezes as required by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Khartoum also should commit to a transparent, inclusive national constitution drafting process that recognizes Sudan as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious nation, and that includes respect for international commitments to human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

The split with the South last year should have taught Khartoum a lesson: Violating the religious freedom and related rights of its citizens is a recipe for endless division and strife. Lasting peace will come only when Khartoum recognizes its international obligation to respect every human right of every one of its citizens.

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