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POLICY UPDATE: SUDAN

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One Year of Progress Advancing Religious Freedom in Sudan

By Mohy Omer, Policy Analyst

Introduction

On April 11, 2019, a historic revolution brought an end to the 30-year-old Islamist-led regime of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan. The military staged a coup in response to months of peaceful demonstrations throughout the country, forcing President al-Bashir out of power. A hybrid military and civilian government was formed to lead a transitional period of three years, paving the way for democratic elections. Since taking office, the transitional government has carried out sweeping legislative and institutional reforms to advance human rights, including religious freedom.

This policy update examines the condition of religious freedom in Sudan after the 2019 revolution and the formation of the civilian-led transitional government. It highlights the historic progress, along with the ongoing challenges, in advancing religious freedom in Sudan. Finally, it discusses the improving bilateral U.S.-Sudan diplomatic relations since the revolution and highlights the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) recommendations to the U.S. government.

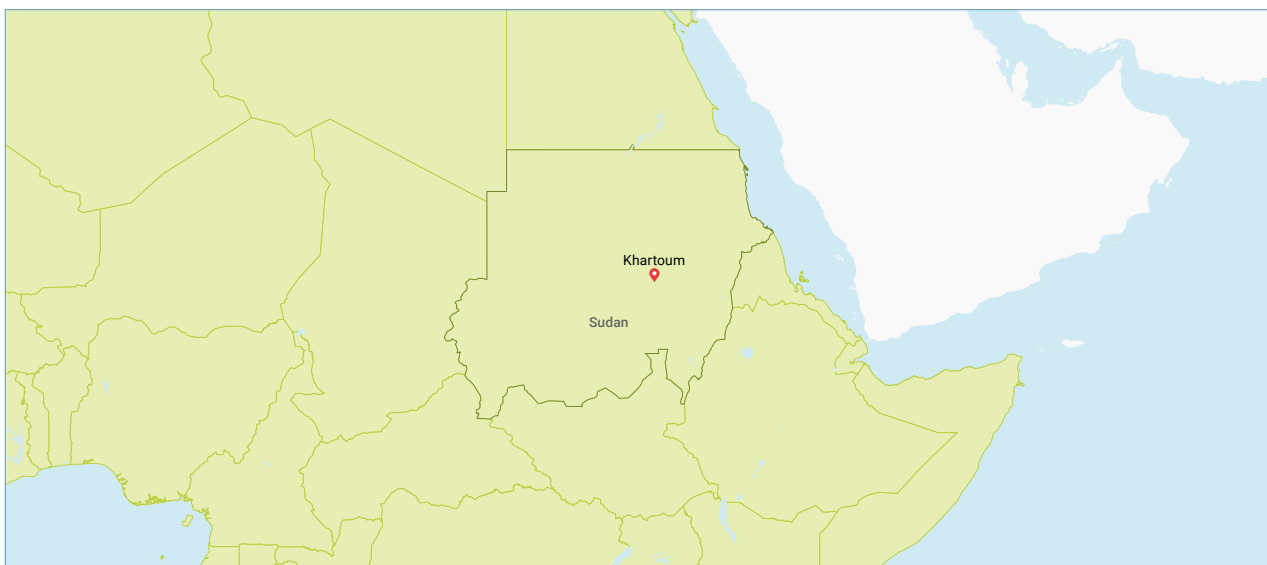
USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

USCIRF has been encouraged by the transitional government's willingness to dialogue and engage on religious freedom issues, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's meeting with USCIRF during a trip to Washington, DC in December 2019. In February 2020, a USCIRF delegation led by then Chair Tony Perkins and Commissioner Anurima Bhargava [traveled to Sudan](#) to assess religious freedom conditions since the revolution. The delegation met with members of the transitional government, including Prime Minister Hamdok, nongovernmental organization representatives, religious and community leaders, academics, and political party leaders.

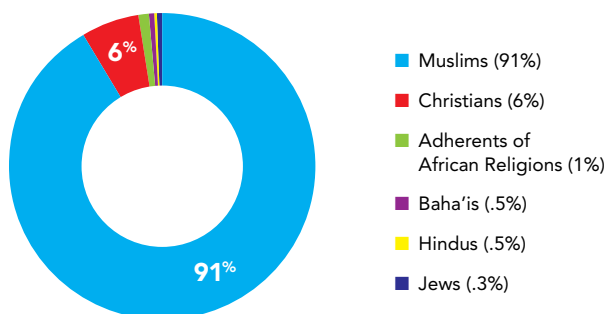
Religious Demography

The population of Sudan is [estimated](#) at 45.6 million, with Sunni Muslims constituting about 91 percent of that number. This figure is disputed, as some believe at least 13 percent of Sudan's population is non-Muslim. Within the Sunni Muslim majority, practices and beliefs vary significantly. In addition, there is a small but growing Shi'a



Muslim community primarily based in the capital city, Khartoum. Six percent of Sudan's population is estimated to be Christian, with at least [36 different denominations](#) represented. However, this figure is also disputed, as many Sudanese Christians and members of other religious minorities live outside Sudan in refugee camps and neighboring countries. The Christian communities that remain in the country are mainly concentrated in Khartoum city and the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions. According to [Pew Research Center](#), there are also small Jewish, Baha'i, and Hindu communities in Khartoum city. Lastly, Sudan's government [statistics](#) indicate that less than 1 percent of the population adheres to indigenous religious practices and beliefs, most of this population resides along the southern border and in rural areas.

Religious Demographics in Sudan



Background on Sudan's 2019 Revolution

Following its independence in 1955 from Anglo-Egyptian rule, Sudan's successive governments imposed Shari'a-based [laws](#) on Muslims and non-Muslims alike,

deepening rifts among the country's widely varied religious communities. President Omar al-Bashir [came](#) to power in 1989 through a military coup, and his regime ramped up religious oppression by brutally imposing a strict Islamist interpretation of Sunni Islam on all Sudanese. However, in November 2018, a [public](#) uprising against the al-Bashir regime's years of systematic corruption and political oppression began in Sennar state. There, a small group of protesters gathered and chanted "*Tasgot Bas*," meaning, "Just collapse!"

The calls for al-Bashir's departure quickly gained momentum and spread throughout the country in late 2018 and early 2019. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese took to the streets, transcending religious differences and ethnic and tribal affiliations. Youth and women took a prominent role as key leaders organizing the peaceful demonstrations. Al-Bashir's security forces [reportedly](#) killed at least 200 demonstrators and injured thousands during the revolution. Despite that lethal force, including the use of live ammunition, protests continued until the military forced al-Bashir to step down and arrested him on corruption charges on April 11, 2019.

Following al-Bashir's ouster, Sudanese military leaders and a coalition of opposition, known as the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), signed an [Interim Constitutional Declaration](#) on August 4, 2019. This transitional constitution provided a framework for a three-year transition period under a civilian government, and it established a joint Sovereign Council between the military and civilians to oversee the peaceful political transition. In August 2019, a [civilian government](#), led by Prime Minister Hamdok, was appointed.

Under Prime Minister Hamdok's leadership, the transitional government unveiled an ambitious outreach plan to engage both national and international stakeholders to support its reforms. On a national level, the transitional government sent several high-level [delegations](#) from various Ministries to some of Sudan's long-marginalized peripheral areas where religious minorities reside, to engage citizens in its democratic reform efforts. On an international level, the Prime Minister led a delegation that [participated](#) in the U.N. General Assembly and visited Washington, DC to share his government's new engagement strategy and seek support for its reform agenda. In addition to hosting USCIRF's delegation in Sudan in February 2020, and in line with a USCIRF recommendation, the transitional government invited the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, to Sudan in August 2020, although his trip was ultimately postponed due to the coronavirus.

Sudan's Transitional Government and Religious Freedom Advancements

During its first year, Sudan's transitional government has committed itself to ending egregious religious violations and improving religious freedom conditions to reflect Sudan's traditionally diverse faiths. The transitional government has taken concrete steps to advance religious freedom protection within a number of key areas:

1. *Key institutional and legal reforms to further religious freedom protections:* The transitional government has repealed laws and regulations restricting religious freedom and related rights, including:
 - The Rights and Freedoms provision of the [Interim Constitution](#) that states "every citizen has the right to freedom of religion or belief," notably excluding reference to Islam as the primary source of law.
 - In December 2019, the transitional government [repealed](#) the repressive public order law that the former regime of al-Bashir systematically used to punish individuals, particularly women, who did not conform to its strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. Both Muslims and non-Muslims suffered the consequences of this brutal law.
 - In [July 2020](#), the transitional government adopted the Miscellaneous Amendments Act, which repealed the apostasy law, ended flogging for blasphemy, banned female genital mutilation (FGM), permitted non-Muslims to drink alcohol, and abolished the guardianship law that required women to get a permit from a male guardian when traveling abroad with their children.

Alongside these legal changes, the transitional government has made efforts to reform and remove religious ideology from state institutions:

- During USCIRF's visit to Sudan, the Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowment stressed that his ministry now supports religious freedom for all and stands equidistant from all religions. His office is working to ensure the right to worship for all religious groups, including developing new laws on places of worship to apply to all religious communities consistently.

2. *Empowerment of women:* The women of Sudan were at the forefront of the 2019 revolution. Angered by years of oppression, political isolation, and the uncontrolled rise in the price of goods, women took to the streets to demand immediate change. According to [reports and witness accounts](#), security forces detained and abused hundreds of women in the lead up to the military's arrest of al-Bashir.

For women across Sudan, the advancement of religious freedom was particularly important, as they greatly suffered the consequences of the former regime's implementation of a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. USCIRF attended a gender and religion roundtable at the University of Khartoum during its 2020 country visit, where participants noted that, under the old regime, there were at least 26 laws that specifically discriminated against women based on the government's interpretation of religion, particularly regarding child marriages and FGM. Some of these laws were changed with the July 2020 passage of the Miscellaneous Amendments Act, including a long-awaited ban on FGM.

Women are also represented at unprecedented levels in the transitional government. Determined to play a leading role, the Sudanese Women Unions demanded 50 percent representation in all levels of government. After a lengthy negotiation with the FFC, women secured 40 percent quota in the legislative branch, which is yet to be formed. Women also have been appointed to high-level positions in both the executive and judicial branches. For example, Raja Nicola and Aisha el-Said were [appointed](#) to the Sovereign Council, Asma Abdalla [became](#) Sudan's first female foreign minister, and Nemat Abdalla was [appointed](#) as the first Chief Justice of Sudan.

3. *Increasing protections for and engagement with religious minorities:* The status of religious minority groups has significantly improved since the revolution. Signaling its commitment to inclusivity, Sudan's transitional government appointed a Coptic [Christian](#) woman to the Sovereign Council. Additionally, the government designated [December 25](#) as a national holiday demonstrating its commitment to religious freedom by encouraging Sudan's sizable Christian community to celebrate. It also issued a [decree](#) disbanding former regime-appointed church councils that the former regime used to justify its systematic oppression of members of the community.

Furthermore, during the September 2019 UN Human Rights Council [meetings](#) in Geneva, Sudan signed an agreement with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to open offices in several historically marginalized areas of the country where religious minorities and indigenous communities reside. These offices are expected to monitor human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations.

4. *Incorporating religious freedom commitments into the peace process:* Sudan's transitional constitution requires that a peace agreement be reached within six months of forming the transitional government. A [coalition](#) of armed movements and pro-democracy political parties, known as the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), and the transitional government began negotiating in Juba, South Sudan in late 2019. Although the mediator set June 20, 2020 as the deadline for a final agreement, the two parties could not reach an agreement on security arrangements and therefore extended the deadline. On Monday, August 31, 2020, the two parties signed a peace agreement in Juba ending two decades of war. According to the two parties the agreement [addressed](#) the root causes of conflict in Sudan, including religious freedom violations against minorities and indigenous groups. The agreement mandated the [establishment](#) of an [independent commission for religious freedom](#) to protect the rights of all Sudanese people to practice their religion of choice.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite the transitional government's notable progress, much work remains to ensure religious freedom for all Sudanese. The nearly 30-year legacy of the former regime's systematic oppression and atrocious violations of the rights of religious minorities and other vulnerable populations will take time to address meaningfully. Sudan's transitional constitution mandated

the establishment of a commission on transitional justice to help address these historical injustices. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok explained to USCIRF that Sudan is in need of national and international support to further transitional justice and to find ways to foster reconciliation among the country's many diverse communities, among whom the former regime intentionally created division.

The claims of churches whose property the former regime destroyed or confiscated must also be addressed. The Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments informed USCIRF during its recent visit to Khartoum that he is working with the Minister of Justice to compile documentation for churches to reclaim their land and property that was seized and/or destroyed in years past. However, stakeholders informed USCIRF that no church has seen property restored to its rightful owners, and these efforts are currently hampered by convoluted bureaucratic processes. Further, as of the time of that visit, the transitional government had not issued any permits for new churches.

Additional legal reforms are required to fully disentangle al-Bashir regime's repressive laws and policies. A pivotal step is the complete repeal of the country's blasphemy law. While the recent Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act [removed](#) the punishment of flogging, blasphemy is still criminalized and carries a punishment of up to six months imprisonment. Further, the apostasy law was [replaced](#) by a provision prohibiting the labeling of any group of individuals as "infidels" (*takfir*). Given the potential impact of this [hate speech provision](#) on the freedom of religion or belief, its text and implications should also be carefully reviewed to ensure compliance with international human rights standards. Another law that requires review is the [Informatic Offenses Act](#) of 2007, which the former regime systematically used to restrict freedom of the press and limit access to the internet in the name of national security concerns, including limiting online religious activities if deemed a national security threat.

In addition to announcing reforms, the transitional government must also work to ensure their wide, immediate, and effective *implementation*—which will require overcoming domestic discontent. A recent [demonstration](#) in June showed a growing frustration with the slow speed of progress in the country. At the same time, [some](#) religious groups have raised concern that certain changes contradict Islamic teachings and accused the transitional government of efforts to secularize the country.

Changes in the legislative framework must also be complemented by comprehensive reform of institutions like the judiciary and educational system. For example, the Ministry of Education is working on implementing comprehensive curricular reform to replace intolerant content in textbooks issued by the former regime with new materials and accompanying teacher training. In a meeting with USCIRF in Khartoum, the head of the National Center for Curriculum and Educational Research indicated that women's roles and achievements will be prominently integrated in the new curriculum, as will Sudan's rich heritage of religious diversity. These important revisions in the educational system will be essential in promoting inclusivity and religious tolerance among the next generation of Sudanese.

Sudan is also facing an economic crisis that threatens its transition. Even since the pre-revolutionary period, Sudan's economy has been suffering from a high inflation rate—currently nearing 100 percent that astronomically raises the prices of goods. As Sudan emerges from more than 20 years of international isolation, economic sanctions, and systematic corruption, experts estimate that at least [\\$1.9 billion](#) is needed to stabilize the country's economy. The May 2020 lockdown to control the spread of [COVID-19](#) worsened this already troubled situation. On June 24, 2020, Germany hosted a donor conference for Sudan that resulted in the United States and its international partners pledging a total of [\\$1.8 billion](#) to support Sudan's dire economic situation. These funds are not only important for economic recovery, but also to support a successful political transition to a sustainable democracy.

Key U.S. Policy Updates

U.S. government policy toward Sudan has changed considerably since the transitional government assumed office in August 2019. Encouraged by the latter's determination to carry out sweeping institutional reforms, the United States adapted a new bilateral engagement strategy. In June 2019, the U.S. Department of State [appointed](#) Special Envoy to Sudan, Ambassador Donald Booth, to lead its diplomatic engagement efforts. Recognizing Sudan's efforts to improve religious freedom conditions, the State Department [removed](#) Sudan from its list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) for particularly severe religious freedom violations in December of 2019, instead placing Sudan on its Special Watch list, a lower category. Furthermore, the United States [announced](#) its intention to exchange ambassadors with Sudan, an occurrence that has not happened since 1999. Lastly, at the Berlin Donor Conference, the U.S. government pledged a total of [\\$356.2 million](#) to

stabilize Sudan's economy and support the transition to a democracy.

Despite this support, the U.S. government continues to designate Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST), which prevents the country from accessing support from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as development assistance from the U.S. government. The SST designation has limited the transitional government's ability to access the funds it needs to carry out the sweeping changes required for a democratic transition, such as reforming institutions to safeguard and promote freedom of religion or belief.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While there is still substantial work yet to be done, Sudan has made remarkable progress to enhance the freedom of religion or belief in the past year. The transitional government has taken concrete steps to improve the situation of religious minorities and other vulnerable populations in the country. It and the armed opposition are working diligently towards reaching a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement to end the suffering of millions of Sudanese, especially those living in refugee and internally displaced persons camps. Newly emerging women- and youth-led civil society organizations have been engaged in enhancing issues of human rights and democratization. Supporting these independent civil society organizations to advocate for human rights issues, including religious freedom, is crucial to a successful and sustainable transition to democracy.

Given these developments, USCIRF recommended in its [2020 Annual Report](#) that the U.S. government:

- Maintain Sudan on the U.S. State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Provide technical and financial assistance to support institutional reform, particularly to the Ministry of Education to replace the former regime's intolerant curriculum with new materials and accompanying teacher training that support religious freedom;
- Provide financial and technical support for the transitional government to support the implementation of transitional justice, legal reform and constitution reform, and the establishment of an independent commission for religious freedom, and independent civil society to promote the freedom of religion or belief and related rights;



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- Support the creation of a high-level international advisory body for human rights in Sudan to hold regular dialogues on reform and progress with its international allies; and
- Continue to encourage the transitional government to host the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, in Sudan, when the spread of coronavirus is controlled.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.