

SUDAN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

On August 17, following the April ouster of President Omar al-Bashir after months of popular protests and a military takeover, the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the opposition coalition, known as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), signed an interim constitutional declaration that includes several provisions protecting the right to freedom of religious belief and worship “in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order.” It makes no reference to sharia as a source of law, as was the case under the former 2005 constitution. The FFC announced that laws promulgated under the former constitution would remain in effect while the civilian-led transitional government (CLTG) worked to amend or abolish those laws and pass new legislation within the framework of the interim constitutional declaration. Some of the laws and practices established by the Bashir administration were based on its government’s interpretation of a sharia system of jurisprudence, which human rights groups stated did not provide protections for some religious minorities, including minority Muslim groups. The law criminalizes apostasy, blasphemy, conversion from Islam to another religion, and questioning or criticizing the Quran, the *Sahaba* (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet. The law does not specifically address proselytizing; however, the Bashir government criminally defined and prosecuted proselytizing as a form of apostasy. While the law does not prohibit the practice of Shia Islam, during the Bashir regime authorities took actions against Shia Muslims. Security services used tear gas, rubber bullets, and other means to disperse groups of worshippers at mosques who were participating in antigovernment protests in February the first half of the year, in response to what the government said was the political nature of their activity. In July the government re-opened a criminal case against the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) leadership, accusing it of criminal trespass and illegal possession of SCOC properties. In August a Coptic Christian was appointed to the Sovereign Council, one of two governing bodies established under the interim constitutional declaration. The final governing body, the Legislative Council, had not been established at year’s end. In September newly-appointed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok said his administration would address “religious discrimination,” and the minister of religion invited Jews and Christians who had left the country to return. In July the rebel group Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North (SPLM-N), active in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan Provinces and led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, extended and signed a cessation of hostilities. Among other measures, al-Hilu called for a secular state with no role

for religion in lawmaking. The CLTG declared December 25 to be a national holiday for the first time.

On December 28, unknown assailants burned a Sudan Interior church, Catholic church, and Orthodox church in Blue Nile State, according to international media. The government said a suspect was arrested and released due to lack of evidence. A Roman Catholic bishop said the country's new leaders should do away with the requirement that churches register with the government as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). A Protestant pastor called for a change in laws governing religion. Press reported numerous instances in which religious leaders made political speeches during worship services at mosques, both in support of the government and against it. Media also reported instances in which Muslims and Christians shared in each other's religious rites and customs while participating in government protests.

In high level discussions with the government and during a religious freedom workshop attended by foreign government officials in January, U.S. officials encouraged respect for religious freedom and the protection of minority religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy officials urged the adoption of laws that not only permit, but actively promote, the ability of congregations and individuals of all faiths to practice their beliefs. In addition, they highlighted the need for greater representation of religious minorities in the government and urged the government to abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of religious groups. The embassy maintained close contact with religious leaders, faith-based groups, and NGOs, and embassy representatives monitored and attended many of the legal proceedings for those prosecuted in connection with their religious beliefs.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Sudan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. Sudan was designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 1999-2018 and moved to a Special Watch List after the Secretary determined the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 44.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Sudanese government, approximately 91 percent of the population is Muslim. It is unclear whether government estimates include

South Sudanese (predominantly Christian or animist) who did not leave after the 2011 separation of South Sudan or returned after conflict erupted in South Sudan in 2013, or other non-South Sudanese, non-Muslim groups. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports 1,056,536 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, including 810,155 South Sudanese refugees. Some religious advocacy groups estimate non-Muslims make up more than 13 percent of the population.

Almost all Muslims are Sunni, although there are significant distinctions among followers of different Sunni traditions, particularly among Sufi orders. Small Shia Muslim communities are based predominantly in Khartoum. At least one Jewish family remains in the Khartoum area.

The government reports the presence of 36 Christian denominations in the country. Christians reside throughout the country, primarily in major cities, such as Khartoum, Port Sudan, Kassala, Gedaref, El Obeid, and El Fasher. Christians also are concentrated in some parts of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile State.

Relatively small but long-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians are in Khartoum, El Obeid in North Kordofan, River Nile and Gezira States, and eastern parts of the country. Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities largely made up of refugees and migrants are in Khartoum and the eastern part of the country. Other larger Christian groups include the Catholic Church, Episcopal Anglican Church, Sudan Church of Christ, Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and Presbyterian Church of the Sudan. Smaller Christian groups include the Africa Inland Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Sudan Interior Church, Sudan Pentecostal Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Government statistics indicate less than 1 percent of the population, primarily in Blue Nile and South Kordofan States, adheres to traditional African religious beliefs. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of these traditional beliefs into their religious practice. A small Baha'i community primarily operates underground.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

On August 17, the TMC and the FFC, a coalition of civil society and political parties, signed a Constitutional Declaration providing for the formation of an

elected civilian government by 2022 and including provisions regarding freedom of belief and worship. The August declaration followed a July power sharing agreement between military and civilian opposition leaders. The power sharing agreement was preceded by the April military ouster of President Omar al-Bashir following months of popular protests against his government, which had ruled the country for 30 years. At year's end, existing laws and institutions governing religion remained in effect while the new government worked to amend and restructure them. While the previous constitution stated all national legislation should be based on sharia, the Constitutional Declaration makes no reference to sharia although the clause restricting the death penalty permits its imposition as punishment of *hudud* and *qasas* crimes.

The Constitutional Declaration repeals the transitional constitution of 2005 while keeping existing laws in effect “unless repealed or amended” by the CLTG. Existing state institutions and organs remained intact unless dissolved by the CLTG.

The Constitutional Declaration provides for the freedom of religious belief and worship and for the free exercise of religious expression “in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order.” The document prohibits involuntary conversion to another faith, discrimination based on religion, and media incitement of religious hatred.

The Constitutional Declaration also has provisions providing for access to education regardless of religion, requiring that political parties be open to citizens of all religions, and ensuring all “ethnic and cultural” groups have the right to “exercise their beliefs” and “observe their religions or customs.” The Interim National Constitution that was in effect until August 17 provided for freedom of religious creed and worship and granted individuals the right to declare their religious beliefs and manifest them through worship, education, practice, or performance, subject to requirements of laws and public order. The constitution prohibited the coercion of individuals to adopt a faith they did not believe in or to engage in rites or services without consent. The previous constitution also stated that nationally enacted legislation should be based on sharia.

The law does not permit Shia Muslims to hold worship services; however, they are allowed to enter Sunni mosques to pray.

Constitutional abuses of freedom of religion may be pursued in the Constitutional Court; however, cases of discrimination often originate and are addressed in lower courts.

National laws concerning personal and family affairs of Muslims adopted during the Bashir administration largely remain in effect and are based on a sharia system of jurisprudence. The criminal code states the law, including at state and local levels, shall be based on sharia sources and include *hudood*, *qasas*, and *diyah* principles (specific serious crimes and related restitution and punishment). The criminal code takes into consideration multiple sharia schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*). The Islamic Panel of Scholars and Preachers (Fiqh Council) determines under which conditions a school of thought will apply. Other criminal and civil laws, including public order laws, are determined at the state and local level.

Former president Bashir appointed the Fiqh Council, an official body of 50 Muslim religious scholars responsible for explaining and interpreting Islamic jurisprudence, to four-year renewable terms. The council advised the government and issued fatwas on religious matters in the past, including levying customs duties on the importation of religious materials, payment of interest on loans for public infrastructure, and determination of government-allotted annual leave for Islamic holidays. The council's opinions are not legally binding. Muslim religious scholars may present differing religious and political viewpoints in public. The Fiqh Council mandate remains the same under the CLTG.

The criminal code does not explicitly mention proselytizing, but it criminalizes both conversion from Islam to any other faith (apostasy) and acts that encourage conversion from Islam. Those who convert from Islam to another religion as well as any Muslim who questions or criticizes the teachings of the Quran, the *Sahaba* (the Companions of the Prophet), or the wives of the Prophet Muhammad may also be considered guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death. Those charged with apostasy are allowed to repent within a period decided by the court, but they may still face up to five years in prison. The law does not prohibit individuals from converting to Islam from another religion.

The criminal code's section on "religious offenses" criminalizes various acts committed against any religion. These include insulting religion, blasphemy, disturbing places of worship, and trespassing upon places of burial. The criminal code states, "whoever insults any religion, their rights or beliefs or sanctifications or seeks to excite feelings of contempt and disrespect against the believers thereof"

shall be punished with up to six months in prison, flogging of up to 40 lashes, and/or a fine. The article includes provisions that prescribe penalties of up to five years' imprisonment and 40 lashes for anyone who curses the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, or members of his respective households.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments (MRA) is responsible for regulating Islamic religious practice, supervising churches, and guaranteeing equal treatment for all religious groups. The MRA also provides recommendations to relevant ministries regarding religious issues government ministries encounter.

Until August 17, to gain official recognition by the government, religious groups were required to register at the state level with the Higher Council for Guidance and Endowments (HCGE), or a related ministry such as the Ministry of Culture and Information, or the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), depending on the nature of the group and its activities. The HAC oversees NGOs and nonprofit organizations. Religious groups that also engage in humanitarian or development activities must register as nonprofit NGOs by filing a standard application required by the HAC for both local and international NGOs. Only religious groups that register are eligible to apply for other administrative benefits, including land ownership, tax exemptions, and work permits.

The state-mandated education curriculum requires that all students receive religious instruction. The curriculum further mandates that all schools, including international schools and private schools operated by Christian groups, provide Islamic education classes to Muslim students, from preschool through the second year of university. The law does not require non-Muslims to attend Islamic education classes, and it mandates that public schools provide Christian students with other religious instruction if there are at least 15 Christian students in a class. According to the Ministry of Education, following the separation of South Sudan, this number was not reached in most schools. Non-Muslim students therefore normally attend religious study classes of their own religion outside of regular school hours to fulfill the religious instruction requirement.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for determining the religious education curriculum. According to the ministry, the Islamic curriculum must follow the Sunni tradition.

The MRA determines, along with the state-level entities responsible for land grants and planning, whether to provide authorization or permits to build new houses of worship, taking into account zoning concerns, such as the distance between

religious institutions and population density (the allocation of land to religious entities is determined at the state level). The HCGE under the previous government was mandated to assist both mosques and churches in obtaining tax exemptions and duty-free permits to import items, such as furniture and religious items for houses of worship; the HCGE also assisted visitors attending meetings sponsored by religious groups and activities to obtain tourist visas through the Ministry of Interior. The HCGE also coordinates travel for the Hajj and Umra.

Public order laws, based largely on the previous government's interpretation of sharia, resulted in strict enforcement by public order authorities. The criminal law under which individuals are arrested prohibits "indecent" dress and other "offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality." Authorities primarily enforced such laws in large cities and enforced laws governing indecent dress against both Muslims and non-Muslims. The criminal code states that an act is contrary to public decency if it violates another person's modesty. In practice, the special Public Order Police and courts, which derived their authority from the Ministry of Interior, had wide latitude in interpreting what dress or behaviors were indecent and in arresting and passing sentence on accused offenders. As of November, the CLTG abolished public order laws and public order police; however, the criminal laws remain in effect.

Some aspects of the criminal code specify punishments for Muslims based on government interpretation of sharia punishment principles. For example, the criminal code stipulates 40 lashes for a Muslim who drinks, possesses, or sells alcohol; no punishment is prescribed for a non-Muslim who drinks or possesses alcohol in private. The criminal code stipulates if a non-Muslim is arrested for public drinking, or possessing or selling alcohol, he or she is subject to trial, but the punishment will not be based on *hudood* principles. The penalty for adultery with a married person is hanging and for an unmarried person 100 lashes. An unmarried man may additionally be punished with expatriation for up to one year. These penalties apply to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Adultery is defined as sexual activity outside of marriage, prior to marriage, or in a marriage that is determined to be void.

Under the law, the justice minister may release any prisoner who memorizes the Quran during his or her prison term. The release requires a recommendation for parole from the prison's director general, a religious committee composed of the Sudan Scholars Organization, and members of the Fiqh Council, which consults with the MRA to ensure decisions comply with Islamic legal regulations.

Under the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman. In practice, Muslim men follow sharia schools of thought, which advise they marry “non-Muslim women of the book,” i.e., either Christian or Jewish women. A Muslim woman, however, legally may marry only a Muslim man. A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man could be charged with adultery.

There are separate family courts for Muslims and non-Muslims to address personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, according to their religion. By law, in custody dispute cases where one parent is Muslim and the other is Christian, courts grant custody to the Muslim parent if there is any concern that the non-Muslim parent would raise the child in a religion other than Islam.

According to Islamic personal status laws, Christians (including children) may not inherit assets from a Muslim.

Government offices and businesses are closed on Friday for prayers and follow an Islamic workweek of Sunday to Thursday. In November Prime Minister Hamdok issued a decree that adjusted work hours to accommodate non-Muslims. The decree ordered academic institutions to stop giving exams on Sunday and authorized Christians to leave work at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday for religious activities. Leave from work was also granted to celebrate Orthodox Christmas, an official state holiday, along with several key Islamic holidays.

An interministerial committee, which includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Intelligence and Security Services (renamed the General Intelligence Service [GIS] in July), and in some cases Military Intelligence, must approve foreign clergy and other foreigners seeking a residency permit.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During antigovernment protests, starting in December 2018 and continuing until the arrest of former President Bashir on April 11, government forces attacked protesters wherever they congregated, including outside mosques, hospitals, and schools. Observers reported that security services used tear gas, rubber bullets, and in some cases live ammunition to disperse groups of worshippers at mosques during widespread antigovernment protests in the first half of the year. On January 4, in Omdurman, media reported security services used tear gas and arrested some participants in an antigovernment march that began at the Wad Nubawi Mosque,

which is associated with the opposition National Umma Party. On January 11, security services used tear gas to disperse a group of 500-1000 worshippers from the same mosque after Friday prayers and did so again in late February.

On January 12, security forces entered the home of Badreldin Yousif Elsimat, the founder of a minority Muslim organization, while members practiced their faith. The members and founder were arrested and detained without charges. Security forces questioned them about their beliefs and protests against the government. All were later released; the founder was the last to be released in March.

On February 8, in Khartoum, according to a statement from the Umma Party, security forces fired tear gas into the courtyard of a mosque as worshippers began a protest march and fired at the vehicle of Sadiq al-Mahdi, a former prime minister of the country. Security forces beat worshippers and threatened them with guns, according to the statement.

On February 14, the commissioner of El Nahud, West Kordofan issued a decree barring Sheikh El Tayeb Abboud from preaching at the town's mosque after the sheikh criticized the beating and arrest of demonstrators by unidentified masked men the week before.

On April 5 following a sermon at a Khartoum mosque calling on then-president al-Bashir to step down, observers said security forces fired rubber bullets at a large group of demonstrators as they left the mosque, injuring several. Also in April, media reported men in civilian clothes thought to be members of a ruling party militia attacked demonstrators in front of a mosque in the Khartoum neighborhood of Al-Jerif West, hitting them with bottles and rocks.

Shia Muslims reported they were arrested during antigovernment protests for civil disobedience, and they were asked about their faith during questioning by security services.

Media reported that during political protests in the first half of the year, security forces strictly enforced the criminal code. They arrested female demonstrators under legal provisions that broadly prohibit "indecent and immoral acts." In March the Court of Appeal in Khartoum overturned the decision by the El Intidad Emergency Court to sentence nine women to one month each of imprisonment and 20 lashes for demonstrating against the government in the Burri District of Khartoum.

In July the rebel group SPLM-N, active in Blue Nile and South Kordofan Provinces and led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, extended and signed a cessation of hostilities. Al-Hilu called for a secular state with no role for religion in lawmaking. He had previously made repeated statements that sharia was incompatible with basic freedom for the people of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, and was his primary rationale for armed struggle against the Bashir government.

In December the minister of religious affairs and endowment announced an investigation of allegations of corrupt practices regarding endowments and the Hajj and Omra pilgrimages to Mecca. He stated there was corruption in the contracts of as many as 117 endowments.

In early November the CLTG abolished the public order law that granted police authority to arrest individuals, in particular women, for a wide range of infractions related to behavior and dress. Prior to the repeal of the law, the Public Order Police frequently charged women with “indecent dress” and “indecent behavior.” Police officers arrested and fined or lashed women for wearing pants and other dress police considered indecent, according to religious leaders. Activists urged the CLTG to repeal other criminal laws under which women may still be arrested.

Minority religious groups, including Muslim minorities and especially Shia Muslims, expressed concern they could be convicted of apostasy if they expressed beliefs or discussed religious practices that differed from those of the Sunni majority. Some Shia reported they remained prohibited from writing articles about their beliefs, and religious issues remained a redline for news media to address.

In October the government confirmed criminal charges against the SCOC leadership, accusing it of criminal trespass and illegal possession of SCOC properties. The government reopened the case in July despite a September 2018 court ruling that the SCOC national leadership committee led by Moderator Ayoub Tilliano had ownership of the SCOC headquarters in Omdurman. The leadership committee was engaged in a legal case over ownership of the property following a 2015 raid by security forces on the SCOC headquarters, after which the security forces confiscated all of the group’s legal documents and brought charges against the leadership council for trespassing.

In previous years, government security services reportedly monitored mosques and imams’ sermons closely, and provided talking points and required imams to use them in their sermons. If an imam’s sermon diverged from the government-

provided talking points, the imam could be removed from his position. It was unclear whether this practice continued under the CLTG.

During political protests that led to the dissolution of the Bashir government, Muslim clerics, including Sufi leaders, participated in sit-ins and protest activities. Sheik Mahran Mahir Osman led many Friday prayers at the sit-ins.

Prisons provided prayer spaces for Muslims, but sources said authorities did not allow Shia prayers. Shia prisoners were permitted to join prayer services led by Sunni imams. Some prisons, such as the Women's Prison in Omdurman, had dedicated areas for Christian observance. Christian clergy held services in prisons, but access was irregular.

The Bashir government continued to state it did not have non-Muslim teachers available to teach courses on Christianity in public schools. Some public schools excused non-Muslims from Islamic education classes. Some private schools, including Christian schools, received government-provided teachers to teach Islamic subjects, but non-Muslim students were not required to attend those classes. Most Christian students attended religious education classes at their churches based on the availability of volunteer teachers from their own church communities. Their families reported that the children's schools did not usually recognize the classes, and students in those cases did not receive credit.

Local parishioners reported that compared to Islamic institutions, Christian places of worship continued to be disproportionately affected by zoning changes, closures, and demolitions. The government said places of worship that were demolished or closed lacked proper land permits or institutional registration and that mosques, churches, schools, hospitals, and residences were all affected equally by the urban planning projects. Observers estimated that the government "systematically closed," demolished, or confiscated at least 24 churches, Christian schools, libraries, and culture centers between 2011 and 2017. In 2018 observers reported one church demolition.

In April the government issued a decree allowing Christian schools to close on Sundays. Since 2017 all schools except Coptic Christian schools were required to operate from Sunday to Thursday.

Before his removal from office, President Bashir and other senior figures frequently emphasized the country's Islamic foundation. His government denied Christian churches or their humanitarian institutions tax-exempt status, although

the government granted this status to Islamic relief agencies. Christian churches reported authorities required them to pay or negotiate taxes on items such as vehicles.

On August 21, a Coptic Christian woman, Raja Nicola Eissa Abdel-Masih, was appointed to the Sovereign Council as the 11th member and only non-Muslim. The council's five military and five FFC representatives agreed to appoint Abdel-Masih, who served as a judge in the Ministry of Justice several years ago, as the sixth civilian member. Before the TMC's abolition of the National Assembly, a small number of Christian politicians, the majority of whom were members of the Coptic Church, held seats in the Bashir-era government.

Prime Minister Hamdok, who along with the new cabinet took office in September, said in a speech at the United Nations on September 27 that his country would address the "root causes of its civil wars" including "ethnic, cultural, and religious discrimination."

In September, shortly after taking office, Minister of Religious Affairs Nasreddine Mufreh in a press interview appealed to Jews and Christians who had left the country to return. The minister said the country was "pluralistic in thought, culture, ideology, and religion." He also stated the government would return confiscated properties to Christian churches and said Christians experienced "persecution" and "very bad practices" during the previous administration. The minister told international press he would fight terrorism, extremism and "*takfiri*" ideology that calls for those who leave Islam to be punished.

On October 6, the prime minister called for an end to hate speech and religious extremism following accusations of apostasy against Minister of Youth and Sports Walaa al-Boushi by Muslim cleric Imam Abdul Hai Yousuf, who accused al-Boushi of apostasy for introducing a women's soccer program in the country. On October 9, the minister of information told reporters the cabinet had directed the Ministry of Justice to take legal action against the imam and stated the attack on the sports minister was an attack on the entire government.

On December 18, the Sovereign Council announced the recognition of Christmas (December 25) and Orthodox Christmas (January 7) as public holidays. On Christmas Eve, Minister of Religious Affairs Mufreh issued a statement apologizing to Christians for the "oppression and harm" they suffered under the previous government.

On November 11, Prime Minister Hamdok ordered a ban on holding examinations in academic institutions on December 25 and January 7. The Prime Minister also instructed public institutions to allow Christians to leave work at 10 a.m. on Sundays to attend church.

On November 26-27, the MRA hosted a workshop in Wad Medani on the role of the Council of Churches to promote peace and development and the spirit of coexistence. Minister Mufreh spoke about the values of tolerance, combating what fuels religious conflicts, and promoting the values of tolerance brought by the Abrahamic faiths.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 28, unknown assailants burned a Sudan Interior Church, Catholic Church, and Orthodox Church in Blue Nile State, according to international media. The government said a suspect was arrested and released due to lack of evidence.

During the civil unrest leading to the ouster of the president and the subsequent three months of military rule, observers said demonstrators displayed mutual respect for each other's religions and rites. Media reported Muslims joined in singing Christian hymns during Christian services organized by protestors while Christians held protective tarps over Muslims as they prayed during the day.

The press reported numerous instances in which religious leaders made political speeches during worship services at mosques, both in support of the government and against it. On April 5, opposition leader Sadiq al-Mahdi gave a sermon in which he called for then-president al-Bashir to step down. During an April 28 sermon at the El Rahma Mosque in Khartoum North, al-Mahdi urged the TMC to arrest officials of the previous administration and called for a rapid handover of power to a civilian government.

In January worshippers at the Anas Ibn Malik Mosque in Khartoum forced a member of the Popular Congress Party (PCP) to leave the mosque after he gave a speech denouncing the protests after Friday prayers, according to press reports. The imam of the Kafouri Mosque in Khartoum North reportedly was forced to leave the mosque after criticizing the protestors during his sermon.

In April the Catholic Bishop of el-Obeid, the capital of North Kurdufan State, said the church played an important role in the popular protests that toppled former

President al-Bashir and called on the new government to abolish the system requiring non-Muslim religious groups to register with the government as NGOs.

On April 14, during a prayer service outside army headquarters, the head of the Evangelical Synod in Sudan, Pastor Rafaat Sameer Masaad, said “the state treats us as a bunch of foreign spies working to destroy our homeland” and called for a change in the laws restricting religious freedom, according to press reports. He added that the protests were a chance for individuals to overcome religious divisions to build an “inclusive” national identity. The prayer service was attended by leaders of several Protestant churches, including Presbyterians, Baptists, and followers of the Sudan Church of Christ.

At the Khartoum International Book Fair in Khartoum on October 21, a stand containing books from and about Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was vandalized by a man who also shouted religious slogans against the display. Taha was a religious scholar hanged for apostasy in 1985. The Minister of Culture and Information expressed his concern about the attack and offered protection for the Taha stand and other stands at the fair.

Individual Muslims and Christians reported generally good relationships at the societal level and stated that instances of intolerance or discrimination by individuals or nongovernmental entities were generally isolated.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On January 29, the Charge d’Affaires delivered a keynote address at the government’s religious freedom workshop and urged the adoption of laws that not only permit, but actively promote, the ability of congregations and individuals of all faiths to practice their beliefs. He emphasized the need for greater representation of religious minorities in the government and urged the government to abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of religious groups. In attendance were senior officials of the Foreign Ministry, representatives of the country’s Christian population, the Anglican Bishop of Leeds, and a representative of the Catholic-affiliated Sant’Egidio community.

Embassy officials attended a service and met with Christian leaders on Christmas to celebrate the new public holiday.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met regularly with imams and Sufi clerics, and clergy and parishioners of Catholic and Protestant churches to hear their views

on the religious freedom situation. Embassy officials attended religious ceremonies of different groups and underscored in regular meetings with leaders of Muslim and Christian groups the importance of religious tolerance. U.S. government representatives closely monitored the legal proceedings concerning religious organizations and religious leaders.

The embassy regularly utilized its social media outlets to share articles and messaging related to religious tolerance and freedom, including messages on tolerance from the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Sudan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. Sudan was designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 1999-2018 and moved to a Special Watch List after the Secretary determined the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom.