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Worship structures in Sudan burned, Christians threatened

Nine of 14 Muslim extremist suspects arrested.

Morning Star News (22.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3oviTLi> - Muslim extremists in Sudan who have burned down a church's worship structure five times threatened to kill congregation members if they put up another tent and continue worshipping, sources said.

Police this month arrested nine of the 14 radical Muslims who burned down the temporary worship structures of the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) in the Dar El-Salam area of Omdurman, across the Nile River from Khartoum, said the attorney representing the Christians, Shanbago Awad Mugadam.

Saying they didn't want a Christian presence in the area, the extremists have burned down the structures on Jan. 19, 2019, and this year on Jan. 4, Jan. 19, Jan. 28, and Aug. 7, Mugadam and a Christian rights advocate told Morning Star News. The church decided to report the attacks to police after the Aug. 7 arson in spite of the threats.

When police refused to file a case, the church hired the attorney whose court actions resulted in police registering the case earlier this month and arresting the nine suspects. Five of the suspects remain at large.

After the Christians reported the attacks to police, one of the suspects told a church leader, "The presence of the church will destroy our generations," Mugadam said.

The church has worshipped in the area since it began on Dec. 24, 1993. After the church's building was burned down last year, the 150-member congregation set up tents to use for worship, with each one reduced to ashes along with Bibles and prayer books, sources said.

A Muslim extremist reportedly incited his son and 13 others to burn the church structures, according to the rights activist. Church members identified some of the 14 assailants.

The pastor of another SCOC church, the Rev. Kuwa Shamal, said the attacks were directed by Muslim extremists associated with the former National Congress Party (NCP), which was led by former President Omar al-Bashir.

"Radical Muslims have attacked the church more than one time, and the case has been filed against the attackers," Pastor Shamal told Morning Star News.

The Sovereignty Council of Sudan that emerged after the deposing of Bashir in April 2019 banned the NCP.

The attacks come amid hopes that persecution of Christians would decline under the new transitional government. The government sworn in on Sept. 8, 2019 led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, an economist, has been tasked with governing during a transition period of 39 months.

The transitional government faces the challenges of rooting out longstanding corruption and an Islamist "deep state" rooted in Bashir's 30 years of power. After Bashir was deposed, military leaders initially formed a military council to rule the country, but further demonstrations led them to accept a transitional government of civilians and military figures, with a predominantly civilian government to be democratically elected in three years. Christians were expected to have greater voice under the new administration.

Following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Bashir had vowed to adopt a stricter version of sharia (Islamic law) and recognize only Islamic culture and the Arabic language. Church leaders said Sudanese authorities demolished or confiscated churches and limited Christian literature on the pretext that most Christians have left the country following South Sudan's secession.

In April 2013 the then-Sudanese Minister of Guidance and Endowments announced that no new licenses would be granted for building new churches in Sudan, citing a decrease in the South Sudanese population. Sudan since 2012 had expelled foreign Christians and bulldozed church buildings. Besides raiding Christian bookstores and arresting Christians, authorities threatened to kill South Sudanese Christians who did not leave or cooperate with them in their effort to find other Christians.

In light of advances in religious freedom since Bashir was ousted in April, the U.S. State Department announced on Dec. 20, 2019 that Sudan had been removed from the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) that engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom" and was upgraded to a watch list.

Sudan had been designated a CPC by the U.S. State Department since 1999.

Sudan ranked 7th on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Sudan will scrap alcohol and apostasy laws, and end flogging

The moves are part of efforts to broaden personal freedoms during a delicate democratic transition.

By Abdi Latif Dahir

New York Times (13.07.2020) — <https://nyti.ms/3349rXI> - Sudan will allow non-Muslims to consume alcohol, scrap its apostasy law and abolish the use of public flogging as a punishment as its transitional government eases decades of strict Islamist policies.

The moves, announced late Saturday by the justice minister Nasredeen Abdulbari, are part of a slew of changes introduced under the transitional government as it seeks to break with the rule of Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who was deposed last year after more

than three decades in power. The government had already [moved to ban the genital cutting of women](#), a measure that is coming into effect now.

The latest announcement came a week after tens of thousands of people took to the streets despite a coronavirus lockdown demanding faster reform and greater civilian rule as the nation takes baby steps toward democracy.

"As a government, our work is to protect all Sudanese citizens based on the Constitution and based on laws that should be consistent with the Constitution," Mr. Abdulbari told state television.

The laws being scrapped are legacies of both Mr. al-Bashir and Gaafar al-Nimeiry, an army colonel who led Sudan between 1969 and 1985. In 1983, he [imposed Islamic law](#) throughout the nation, precipitating the conflict between the Muslim majority north and the mainly Christian and animist south that led to [South Sudan's secession in 2011](#).

After taking power in 1989, Mr. al-Bashir extended Islamic rule and introduced public order laws that criminalized a wide array of activities and behaviors, including drinking alcohol and wearing revealing clothes for women. Those who contravened the rules faced prison sentences, fines and public lashing. Rights organizations said the laws [were "oppressive"](#) and gave the authorities extensive powers to make arbitrary arrests, particularly of women.

The apostasy rules in particular drew worldwide condemnation after a heavily pregnant woman [was sentenced to death](#) in 2014 for renouncing Islam. The woman, Meriam Ibrahim, gave birth while she was in prison and was later released after organizations including Amnesty International [campaigned for her release](#).



Meriam Ibrahim, who was sentenced to death for apostasy while pregnant but later released, arriving in Italy in 2014. Credit...Riccardo De Luca/Associated Press

Mr. Abdulbari said the government had decided to get rid of the apostasy law because it was "a threat to the security and safety of society."

The repeal is "seen as broadening personal freedoms and is a sharp departure from the previous prohibitive regime," said David Kiwuka, director of the Center for Advanced International Studies at the University of Nottingham's campus in Ningbo, China, who described it as "a strong signal" that Sudan was changing under its civilian authorities.

After Mr. al-Bashir [was toppled](#) in April 2019 following months of protests, his government was replaced by an 11-member sovereign council consisting of six civilians and five military leaders, tasked with preparing the country for elections after a three-year transition period.

The council appointed Abdalla Hamdok, an economist who has held several United Nations positions, as prime minister, and his government immediately embarked on an ambitious program as it sought to placate pro-democracy demonstrators and rejoin the international community.

As they moved to dissolve the former governing party of Mr. al-Bashir last November, the authorities also overturned a moral policing law that dictated women's dress, and in April they approved a ban on genital cutting.

Mr. Hamdok's government has also undertaken a political and economic overhaul, revived talks with rebel groups, and [begun investigations](#) into the bloody suppression of the Darfur region under Mr. al-Bashir, promising to [prosecute and possibly hand over](#) to the International Criminal Court those wanted for war crimes.

The administration [has also lobbied](#) the United States to drop Sudan from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, a designation that has restricted investment and foreign aid.

Yet despite the good will and heady optimism, Sudan's political transition remains delicate, buffeted by economic headwinds and restrictions necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic. Mr. Hamdok survived an assassination attempt in March, and [concerns of a coup](#) have swirled in recent months.

July, one person was killed and several others were injured at protests in major cities including the capital, Khartoum, demanding the swift delivery of "freedom, peace and justice." On Sunday, security forces forcibly dispersed a sit-in in Darfur, which some took as an indication that the military retains the balance of real power.

Observers said on Monday that the scrapping of the laws should be read within the broader context of Sudan turning a new page and promoting a more inclusive and representative society. But more would need to be done if the government were to change long-held cultural practices, said Ahmed Soliman, a research fellow at the Africa Program at the British foreign-policy research institute Chatham House.

"The transitional government has demonstrated its intent to keep equal citizenship at the forefront of the political transition, including by addressing issues of gender and religious freedoms," Mr. Soliman said, adding: "There is also division about these reforms, with a strong backlash by conservative religious and political figures who see the changes as an attack on Islam and morality."

HRWF Comment

HRWF hails this tremendous democratic progress and warmly congratulates the transitional government of Sudan. The Vatican, the United States, the European Union and HRWF also campaigned heavily for the release of Meriam Ibrahim. After she was freed, she was invited to testify at the European Parliament in Brussels.

Minister of Religious Affairs appoints commissioners to investigate Khartoum church attack

CSW (09.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Ka3MV4> - The Sudanese Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments has appointed five commissioners to investigate a series of attacks on the Sudan Church of Christ (SCOC) Jabarona, which took place in December 2019 and January 2020.

On 18 March CSW called on the Sudanese government to investigate the attacks on the SCOC Jabarona and on churches in Blue Nile State which took place during the same period. On 20 March, the Minister for Religious Affairs and Endowments, Mr Nasr al-Din Mufreh, pledged to investigate.

On 29 March Mr Mufreh signed a ministerial order appointing commissioners tasked with three primary duties: to draw up a list of properties owned by the church in the metropolis of Khartoum; to review all investment properties on land allocated to the church in Khartoum, Khartoum Bahri and Omdurman; and to investigate the attacks on the SCOC Jabarona.

The commissioners were given seven days to complete their investigation, and conducted their first interviews with the SCOC on 2 April. However, due to restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19, the investigation is expected to take longer to complete.

The SCOC in Jabarona was attacked on 18 December, 14 January, 21 January and 29 January. During each incident, the assailants attempted to burn down parts of the place of worship. In addition to the attacks, church leaders received serious threats from Muslim extremists living in the area, who warned that they would not allow churches to be built there even if official permission was granted.

Demas Margan, a human rights lawyer and legal representative for the SCOC, told CSW: "The investigation is far broader than just the attacks on the church in Jabarona. Generally in Sudan cemeteries are allocated by the government, separate land is designated for Muslims and Christians. During the previous government, corrupt officials and investors bought the land that was set aside for Christian cemeteries and established businesses. This is an important area to investigate; however, it is disappointing that the investigation has a limited time to report and has not been extended to other parts of Sudan."

The investigation is limited to the situation in Khartoum alone; however, concerns have been raised over increasing attacks on churches in Blue Nile state. On 9 March extremists razed the Sudanese Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) in Bout Town, El Tadamon locality, Blue Nile state, to the ground. The attack occurred in the same town where buildings belonging to the Sudan Internal Church, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church were attacked on 28 December 2019 and again on 16 January 2020. Despite assurances from the Federal and State governments that the churches would be rebuilt and perpetrators would be brought to justice, the churches are still waiting for a resolution.

Human Rights Without Frontiers FoRB Newsletter | Sudan CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "CSW welcomes the appointment of commissioners to investigate the attack on the Sudanese Church of Christ in Jabarona and make an assessment of land issues that churches in Khartoum are experiencing. However, we remain concerned that attacks on religious minorities outside of Khartoum are not being addressed. The trend speaks to a wider concern of the government centralising its action in the capital city and side-lining the plight of historically marginalised communities. We urge the government

to take swift action to address these imbalances and to comprehensively investigate violations occurring in Blue Nile state.”