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Apostasy charges against Christians in Sudan dismissed

Judge cites nullification of apostasy law two years ago.

Morning Star News (16.09.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3xHYhWW> - A court in Sudan on Sept. 8 dismissed apostasy charges against four Christians who were threatened with the death penalty unless they recanted, sources said.

Judge Ibrahim Hamza dismissed the apostasy charges against [the Christians in Central Darfur](#) state, stating that apostasy is no longer a crime in Sudan, their attorney said.

Initially arrested on June 24 in Zalingei, Central Darfur, the four converts from Islam had been subjected to degrading treatment while questioned, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). They were released that day but re-arrested on June 28.

“On July 3 the men were brought before the prosecutor, who told them they would face the death penalty if they did not renounce their Christian faith and agree not to pray, share their faith or participate in any activities that would identify them as Christians,” CSW stated. “The men refused and were charged with apostasy.”

Bader el Dean Haroon Abdel Jabaar, his brother Mohammad Haroon Abdel Jabaar, Tariq Adam Abdalla and Morthada Ismail were arrested from their church in Zalingei and held until their release on bail in early July, according to local sources.

They were arrested on apostasy charges under Article 126 of Sudan’s 1991 criminal code – which was nullified in 2020. In July 2020 the transitional government that took effect in September 2019 [decriminalized apostasy](#), which had been punishable by death. Sudan’s 2020 Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act prohibits the labeling of any group as “infidels” (*takfir*), according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

The church the four Christians had formed was authorized by Sudan’s Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments during the transitional period, but it has closed due to threats and attacks by area Muslim extremists, according to CSW. Three other churches have [closed](#) in Zalingei this year due to an increase in threats and violence, the group reported.

Since the military coup of Oct. 25, 2021, officials have threatened church leaders living in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), telling them they would be charged with apostasy if they continued to meet for prayer, CSW reported.

“When the leaders protested, citing the legal changes made under the transitional administration, they were informed that the coup had changed the legal situation,” CSW stated.

The 2020 Act also repealed other Islamic-based articles of the 1991 criminal code, including public flogging as a punishment and prohibitions against drinking alcohol. Although Sudan has taken some steps to reform laws that violate religious rights, most current statutes are still based on Islamic law, Christian leaders say.

Following two years of advances in religious freedom in Sudan after the end of the Islamist dictatorship under Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the specter of state-sponsored persecution returned with the military coup of Oct. 25, 2021.

After Bashir was ousted from 30 years of power in April 2019, the transitional civilian-military government had managed to undo some *sharia* (Islamic law) provisions. It outlawed the labeling of any religious group "infidels" and thus effectively rescinded apostasy laws that made leaving Islam punishable by death.

With the Oct. 25 coup, Christians in Sudan fear the return of the most repressive and harsh aspects of Islamic law. Abdalla Hamdok, who had led a transitional government as prime minister starting in September 2019, was detained under house arrest for nearly a month before he was released and reinstated in a tenuous power-sharing agreement in November 2021.

Hamdok had been faced with rooting out longstanding corruption and an Islamist "deep state" from Bashir's regime – the same deep state that is suspected of rooting out the transitional government in the Oct. 25 coup.

Persecution of Christians by non-state actors continued before and after the coup. In Open Doors' 2022 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian, Sudan remained at No. 13, where it ranked the previous year, as attacks by non-state actors continued and religious freedom reforms at the national level were not enacted locally.

Sudan had dropped out of the top 10 for the first time in six years when it first ranked No. 13 in the 2021 World Watch List. The U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report states that conditions have improved somewhat with the decriminalization of apostasy and a halt to demolition of churches, but that conservative Islam still dominates society; Christians face discrimination, including problems in obtaining licenses for constructing church buildings.

The U.S. State Department in 2019 removed Sudan from the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) that engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom" and upgraded it to a watch list. The State Department removed Sudan from the Special Watch List in December 2020. Sudan had previously been designated as a CPC from 1999 to 2018.

The Christian population of Sudan is estimated at 2 million, or 4.5 percent of the total population of more than 43 million.

Photo: Darfur Region, Sudan. (NordNordWest, Creative Commons)

Evangelical church properties threatened with demolition

CSW (25.05.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3wVdGBX> - A court in Sudan has approved the demolition of a 2000 square metre block of properties owned by the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) in Omdurman, Sudan's second city.

The properties adjacent to the church comprise three homes that are rented to private tenants, three medical clinics, two laboratories, a pharmacy and a shop. The tenants, owners and the legitimate administrative committee of SPEC did not receive legal notification of the decision and only became aware of the plans when police officers arrived at the properties on 25 May.

Among the significant police presence which arrived at the premises on 25 May were four trucks and members of the armed police units who displayed their weapons. Some of the tenants were able to submit an appeal, and the court has stayed the demolition order until 7 June. Prior to the second order, three homes, including that of a 75-year-old man, and several businesses were destroyed.

A church leader who asked not to be named told CSW: "If this demolition is allowed it will be a disaster for the families and businesses who, without notice, could lose everything. For the church it is yet another blow in the struggle to control and administrate their land, and forms part of the exhausting discrimination that the Christian community is subjected to by the authorities. We had no notice of this decision, and have had to gather lawyers and attend the court to try and prevent this unlawful action in the knowledge that some may be arrested for standing up for their rights and we will once again be forced to defend ourselves through the criminal courts."

The properties are in a prime location in Omdurman across from the main hospital, and are of significant financial value. A number of the homes are rented to members of church and clergy, who previously faced legal challenges to evict them during the al Bashir regime. It is suspected that individuals who sit on an illegitimate government-constituted committee are working together with government officials and investors to seize the land.

In Sudan, church committees recognised by the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments, which oversees religious affairs, are legally empowered to control a church's affairs. During the al Bashir era, the government abused this provision in order to retain significant control over the internal processes of churches, and to further restrict the rights of Christians. [Interference in church affairs](#) was commonplace and was primarily undertaken by National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) officers, who pitted Christians against each other. The government would subsequently claim that disputes such as those concerning different committees were an internal church matter that did not involve the state.

During the transitional period, some important steps were taken to improve the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). While slow to address the issues of church interference, the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments reached an agreement

with the legitimate administrative committee of SPEC for administrative control over the church's affairs. However, in November 2021 a judge [dismissed](#) this agreement . The decision came shortly after the [military coup](#) of 25 October 2021, and the steady rise in influence of the National Congress Party (NCP), the party of former president Omar al Bashir.

CSW's CEO Scot Bower said: ***"We are alarmed by the attempt to demolish significant properties belonging to the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) without notice. We urge the Sudanese authorities to review this decision, mindful of the fact that such a demolition will empower those with no legitimate standing to act on behalf of the church. We call on the international community to remind the military leadership of its de facto responsibility in Sudan to protect human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and to uphold the principle of non-discrimination."***

Photo: The site of the attempted demolition in Omdurman – csw.org.uk