

Christians in Sudan face increased hostility

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

Despite a promise by the Sudanese government to grant its minority Christian population religious freedom, church leaders there said they are beset by increased restrictions and hostility in the wake of the South Sudan's independence.

In 2011, South Sudan, a mostly Christian region, split from the predominantly Muslim and Arab north, in a process strongly supported by the international community and churches in the West.

The two regions had fought a two-decade-long civil war that ended in 2005 following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The pact granted the South Sudanese a referendum after a six-year interim period and independence six months later. In the referendum, the people of South Sudan chose separation.

While the separation has been seen as good for political reasons, several churches in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, have been destroyed and others closed down along with affiliated schools and orphanages.

Christians in Sudan are facing increased arrests, detention and deportation with church-associated centers being raided and foreign missionaries kicked out, according to the leaders.

"The situation of Christians and the church is very difficult at the moment," said Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Adwok of the Khartoum Archdiocese.

After the secession, President Omar al-Bashir promised a country governed by an Islamic constitution where Islam is the official religion. On July 7, Bashir declared the constitution would serve as "a role model for all people who have aspirations to apply religion in all aspects of their lives."

He also promised the participation of religious leaders in writing the laws. But church leaders say that is unlikely. Though the current constitution recognizes all religions, in practice the government has not been inclusive. More than 97 percent of Sudan's 30 million residents are Muslim.

Recently, some government officials, politicians and Muslim leaders have issued statements that indicate the growing intolerance.

In April, Al-Fatih Taj El-sir, the minister for guidance and social endowments, said the government would no longer license new churches because attendance had stagnated following the independence of South Sudan. In an address to parliament, El-sir said abandoned church buildings had increased after most Christians had moved to the south.

In May, Ammar Saleh, the chairman of the Khartoum-based Islamic Centre for Preaching and Comparative Studies, rebuked his government for failing to take decisive action against Christians who were allegedly operating “boldly” in the country.

Adwok said he found the government statements disturbing.

“It is true some have moved to South Sudan, but there are many who are still here,” he said. “This statement [that all Christians have left] cannot be thrown around aimlessly. The numbers have decreased, but it does not mean there are no Christians here.”

More than 300,000 Christians live in Khartoum, according to the leaders, with many others living in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions, where they have been subjected to aerial bombardment by the Sudanese air force, according to humanitarian agencies. —RNS

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