

Ban on church construction angers Sudanese, Meriam Ibrahim allowed to emigrate

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All Saints' Cathedral (Anglican) is located in in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Sudan's government says the nation needs no more churches. RNS photo by Fredrick Nzwili

Christians in Sudan frequently face arrests, impromptu questioning, and expulsion. But conditions worsened after the government announced a ban on the construction of new churches.

Shalil Abdullah, the Sudanese minister for guidance and religious endowments, made the announcement in July, sparking criticism from top Christian clerics who warned of shrinking worship space in the mainly Muslim and Arab north.

South Sudan became an independent nation in 2011, and many Christians moved to that country, which has a large Christian population. But a sizable number remained in Sudan.

Abdullah argued that there is no need to grant plots of land for new churches since the existing ones are enough.

Kori Elramla Kori Kuku, general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, said the government's intentions were shocking and misleading.

"We have the right to have new plots of land and building of new churches," he said. "We need the churches for the growing of Sudanese Christians."

Sudanese religious freedom became a rallying cry after the death sentence given to Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, a Christian doctor who was charged with apostasy. Ibrahim, 26, who is married to a U.S. citizen from South Sudan, was freed in late July. The family planned to settle in New England.

"We will begin a new life," Ibrahim told Antonella Napoli, head of Italians for Darfur, according to the daily *La Repubblica*. "My husband, a chemist, lost his job because of my event. Now we will go to New Hampshire, where my brother-in-law Gabriel lives. They will help us. We will be all together as a true family."

The Italian government had flown Ibrahim to Rome in secret on July 24 following an international campaign to free her. Lapo Pistelli, Italy's deputy foreign minister, said that authorities had returned Ibrahim's Sudanese passport the day before and told her that she could leave the country with her husband.

"When I was asked to renounce my Christian faith, I knew what I was risking," Ibrahim told *La Repubblica*. "But I did not want to renounce it."

Within hours of landing in Italy, Ibrahim met with Pope Francis, accompanied by her husband, Daniel Wani, their 20-month-old son, Martin, and their daughter, Maya. Ibrahim gave birth to Maya in chains in a Khartoum jail cell in May.

"I never believed I would fulfill my lifelong dream—to meet the pope," Ibrahim reportedly said. "I have always wanted and only wanted my faith. The love of my husband is a gift from God."

The pope thanked Ibrahim for her courage and loyalty to her Christian faith despite facing threats of execution in an ordeal that lasted nearly a year. The Vatican's chief spokesman, Federico Lombardi, said Francis wanted the meeting to be a "gesture of support for all those who suffer for their faith, or [are] living in situations of difficulty or restraint."

Ibrahim had been trapped in Sudan since her release from prison where she was awaiting execution for refusing to renounce Christianity. Though Ibrahim grew up

under the care of her Orthodox Christian mother and was admitted into the Catholic Church before her 2012 marriage, Sudan considered her a Muslim because her father is Muslim. Her father claimed she had abandoned Islam and committed adultery with her Christian husband, since interfaith marriages are considered illegal. The country's supreme court threw out the death sentence in June. —RNS