



I
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM
INSTITUTE

Cornerstone Forum

*A Conversation on Religious Freedom
and Its Social Implications*

No. 275. March 4, 2020

New Prospects for Justice and Religious Freedom in Sudan

Scott Morgan

Chair of the Africa Working Group, International Religious Freedom Roundtable

Stunning. There is not a more apt word to describe the reaction of religious freedom advocates on the morning of February 11th.

What event could yield such a reaction? This one did. It was announced that the Transitional Council in Sudan and several rebel groups had agreed to transfer all five individuals that were indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes committed during the Darfur conflict. This list includes [former President Omar Al-Bashir](#). It was also announced that both parties agreed to organize a special court for crimes committed in Darfur, including cases investigated by the ICC. These actions will be construed as a major move by the transitional authorities to restore justice in a country that has seen conflict and other forms of strife for decades.

Although no official timeline was announced for the transfer of these prisoners, it is already a victory in a sense that there is public acknowledgment that former President will be held accountable for his actions in Darfur. Some advocates would like to see the former President also be held accountable for the actions of the Sudanese Armed Forces in the Nuba Mountains as well as the program of enforced church demolitions.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) considers Sudan to be a [Tier 1 Country](#) recommended for the State Department's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) list. This list is reserved for nations where violations against those seeking to exercise their freedom to practice their faith is under extreme duress, meeting a standard of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. Sadly, Sudan has been placed on this list since its inception in 1999. The State Department's [annual report on international religious freedom](#) only serves to further confirm the horror stories that have been taking place in Sudan.

For a year now, Sudan has been in the midst of a transition. Bashir was removed from Office by the military in April 2019 after months of protests. A transitional government is currently in place and will govern until new elections are held. There is one sure sign indicating a desire for change. There is a considerable desire from the new leadership in Khartoum to improve relations with the United States which were mostly hostile after Bashir took power himself after a coup in 1989. The Trump Administration is currently sending signals that it is interested in listening to see how Sudan could return to democratic governance. However the Trump Administration is taking some steps to determine whether or not the transitional leaders are in fact honest brokers or a new facade to the previous regime.

Over the next few months there will be three visits from U.S. officials to Sudan. A delegation from USCIRF, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Robert Destro. It would be of strategic value if these trips include more of the country than just the capital of Khartoum and Darfur. The Nuba Mountains area was the scene of brutal conflict during the rule of Bashir. It has been often overlooked by most investigators. An update and personal visit from U.S. officials would be of strategic value.

One of the key opportunities for the US government officials to test the sincerity of the new leadership in Sudan is to have meetings with Sudanese church leaders. During the last couple of years a list was compiled of churches that were ordered to be closed. Officials assess whether or not any future action will be taken against these houses of worship. Advocacy groups will be monitoring these actions to determine if these threats persist under the transition.

No matter which mission is visiting the country it is expected that the situation in Darfur will remain the main focus of some advocates. There is value in this logic and the region should not be ignored by officials who are monitoring what steps Sudan might be making to improve its support for fundamental rights and freedoms for all Sudanese.

Progress with respect to these areas should be considered as positive moves in the new government's efforts to emerge from a one-party state.

However, the transition itself may prove to be chaotic as well. Loyalists to former President Bashir have been staging protests and are believed to have attempted a coup in recent weeks as well. As the election date draws closer, there may be an increase in these negative actions with an aim to discredit the process of establishing a new "post-Bashir" political order.

Considering how volatile other flashpoints currently are in Africa, it is a sound strategy for the United States and others to devote increased attention to support a peaceful transition to civilian rule in Sudan. Promoting respect for robust religious freedom for all is an important place to begin and should be a fundamental priority of anyone seeking a more stable and secure political order in Sudan.

Scott Morgan is the President of Red Eagle Enterprises. He is a former U.S. Marine and specializes in U.S. Policy towards Africa focusing on Security and Asymmetrical Operations and Business Development South of the Sahara. He is Chair of the Africa Working Group for the International Religious Freedom Roundtable in Washington, D.C.

All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.



Permanent Link:

<https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/new-prospects-for-justice-and-religious-freedom-in-sudan>

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | rfi.org