

Documenting Changes in Religious Freedom Conditions in Sudan





Executive Summary

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), genuine success stories where the promotion of international religious freedom is concerned have been hard to find. The MENA region remains one in which religious freedom is rare, and positive steps are often poorly institutionalized. Thus, International Religious Freedom (IRF) advocates, scholars and practitioners have greeted the rapid and dramatic shift toward international religious freedom in Sudan with a great deal of optimism. From one of the world's worst offenders, Sudan has, by some measures, leap-frogged many other MENA countries in a very short period of time. This success has been reflected in changes to the legal code, declarations of principles, an international religious freedom roundtable, and a strong endorsement of positive change from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). For a country that was routinely viewed as a country of particular concern by the IRF office at the U.S. State Department, this transformation has been quite remarkable.

The purpose of this case study is to analyze the changing religious freedom landscape in Sudan. The goal is threefold: to analyze, concretely, what happened and why; to assess Sudan's future prospects of maintaining

or improving upon this positive momentum; and to develop possible best practices for IRF work in other countries throughout the MENA region and beyond.

To achieve these outcomes, our research team followed two tracks. The first was a review of secondary literature on Sudan, in order to establish the context within which changes in the IRF landscape occurred. The second was a series of interviews with IRF practitioners and observers of Sudan's IRF landscape. Content analysis was used to analyze these interviews for common themes. The goal was to gain a picture of what IRF advocates believed to be the causes and trajectory of the situation and lessons learned from the IRF changes in Sudan.

Based on our research, several preliminary conclusions seem evident. These conclusions are "preliminary" not necessarily due to our research, but due to the continuing volatility of conditions in Sudan—a country that remains very much in a transitional period after the 2019 revolution.

First, contrary to popular reports, the Sudanese Revolution represented a culmination of factors internal and external to the regime. Internally, power struggles within the military and

security apparatus emerged, driven in part by the general decay of the Islamist project and in part by the regional cold war between Iran and the Sunni Arab states. Externally, long-standing and simmering discontent, combined with economic shocks partially driven by the previously-discussed regional dynamics, led to mass protests. Regime paralysis left Bashir and his inner circle unable to respond and ripe for defection. What is unique in Sudan, as compared with Egypt, for example, is the degree to which the mere ouster

of Bashir failed to satisfy protesters. Indeed, the still unresolved issue of post-ouster civilian massacres speaks to a broader disconnect between the civilian population and the security services—which, again unlike Egypt, still face internal divisions of their own.

This complex dynamic, combined with a need for international aid, has created a window in which the transitional government has been uniquely open to religious freedom. On one hand, the demands of the population for honest,

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accountable government and a rejection of Islamism are real. On the other, the CPC designation along with the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation (made in 1993 and removed in December 2020) were seen by the government as an impediment to aid. Finally, key actors in the security services have seen utility in differentiating themselves—often very publicly and forcefully—from the Islamist past, to appease both domestic and international constituencies.

With all that said, we found substantial potential points of concern for Sudan moving forward. Potential volatility, a powerful security sector that retains some Islamist presence and considerable power, and the general need to uproot the long-term legacy of the Bashir regime and its ideology all remain obstacles to the consolidation of Sudan's positive IRF trends. Perhaps the single greatest source of concern is general stability. In an already volatile transition environment, we identified a substantial risk of continued regime instability, possibly to include major revisions to the social compact the transitional government represents. While this is unlikely to lead to a new birth of Islamism, a system perhaps similar to that of Egypt is a realistic near-term outcome. And while Egypt is certainly better than Sudan was before the revolution, it would represent a step back from the promising trajectory Sudan is currently on where IRF is concerned.

In light of this, we recommend several steps to consolidate IRF gains in Sudan. The first and most pressing of these recommendations involves security sector reform. A historical examination of Sudan since independence indicates

that military rule is a very real possibility in the near-term. Since independence, a clear pattern has emerged: a brief, chaotic period of democracy followed by a coup that leads to a military dictatorship. Breaking this cycle is essential to democratization in the long-term. At a minimum, some level of security sector reform will be essential for the preservation and expansion of IRF in Sudan. In this regard, a pivotal element to consider is the active and ongoing relationship between outside actors—the Arab troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular—and elements within their security forces. While substantial reforms that limit the military's influence over the civilian government would be ideal in the long-term, this could actually exacerbate tensions between the military and civilians in the short-term, which only benefits Islamists and others seeking to de-stabilize the country. That said, in the short-term, practical, narrowly-focused reforms designed to increase support for IRF within the military could be enormously beneficial. Most critical of these is the promise, made in the Declaration of Principles, to integrate rebel forces and as much of the RSF as possible (commensurate with the needs for justice and reform) into the Sudanese military. This would weaken the Islamists substantially, while also creating a military that is robustly pluralistic in ethnic and religious terms, and dedicated to a future for Sudan embracing all its citizens. It is vitally important for this integration to be more than mere window-dressing. SPLM leaders and members of other rebel groups should be integrated throughout the Sudanese military, up to the highest ranks where appropriate, and professional military education in Sudan must inculcate a shared culture of ethnic and religious pluralism. IRF advocates should



encourage defense establishments in the U.S. and elsewhere to structure future military aid to Sudan in such a way as to make the new Sudanese military multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, and committed to religious freedom. Over time, this will also inculcate a positive civil-military balance within Sudan that could break the cycle of military coups plaguing the country since independence, leading to the security sector reforms Sudan's democracy needs.

Safeguarding Sudan's ethnic pluralism is vital to the preservation of IRF, but at the same time, it is essential to guard against any attempt to use regionalism as a means to weaken IRF in Sudan. In this regard, it is important to make sure that any movement toward regional autonomy does not allow for religious freedom violations at a regional level. In particular, close attention must be paid to any attempt to allow Sharia law at a regional level even if it is not operative nationally. In other Muslim-majority countries that have

allowed for local implementation of Sharia Law, such as Indonesia and Nigeria, it has served as both a source of persecution against Christians and as a means of solidifying the position of Islamists within certain regions of the country.

Next to security sector reform, the best practice our interviewees, and the secondary literature, identified as most critical was training and education on IRF within the local context. Within Sudan, education within a local context begins at the national level. The national educational curriculum must include the promotion of IRF. However, engagement with practices and curricula in religious schools—both Christian and Muslim—is also critical. Here, the main objective is to let local actors develop their own language to describe and discuss IRF.

Another extremely important recommendation is for IRF advocates to cultivate alliances with key Muslim actors within Sudan. As our research

indicates, the Republican Brotherhood is undoubtedly the most sympathetic Muslim organization to IRF, yet its appeal may be limited due to the controversial nature of its teachings within Islam. The large, diffuse and generally popular Sufi brotherhoods represent an intriguing possibility in terms of expanding the coalition. In general, much more work needs to be done in identifying co-belligerent Muslim groups, both within Sudan specifically and in the MENA region in general who have common cause in opposing religious repression. One way to forge and foster these alliances in the immediate term is through careful analysis of the regulations promulgated by the new government on Muslim worship, to ensure they are not written to favor one Muslim tradition or orientation over another. Sufi groups should be engaged to ensure they are satisfied with the regulations, and given their unique approach to prayer and worship, similar conversations are worth having with the Republican Brotherhood.

Finally, IRF advocates should engage in a campaign of regional IRF work focused on the Nuba mountains. Nuba is a region in which a strong culture of religious pluralism already exists. There is also a direct relationship between ethnic pluralism and religious freedom in Sudan, given how Arabization and Islamization went hand in hand under the Bashir regime. Thus, developing a strong regional model of religious freedom that also demonstrates the ethnic pluralism of the country could prove quite beneficial. We recommend the recent successful IRF work in Iraqi Kurdistan as a possible model for Nuba. Like Iraqi Kurdistan, Nuba could prove valuable as a model of

religious freedom and a bulwark against retrenchment if some of the concerns about Sudan's volatility are born out. Further comparative research on Nuba and Iraqi Kurdistan—both of which are regions that have shown a great deal more pluralism than the countries at large—could also be instructive in terms of developing best practices. In short, finding out what led to vibrant religious pluralism in Nuba and Iraqi Kurdistan could help IRF advocates better hone in on how this culture can be fostered elsewhere.

We also see several best practices emerging from the Sudan case study, with implications for broader IRF promotion. Most of all, our interviewees agreed that smart, targeted, relational and contextual strategies were most effective at advancing IRF. Thorough analysis of facts on the ground and building relationships with key leaders are the two practices most conducive to a smart contextual approach. These two recommendations, of course, go hand in hand. Any effective work in a country must begin with a thorough, detailed and objective assessment of facts on the ground. This is as true of IRF promotion as it is of a military operation—with the same likelihood of failure if intelligence is insufficient or inaccurate. This assessment can help identify key leaders—defined here as the person or people who have enough leverage to make the desired change on IRF. The purpose of key leader engagements is to persuade these figures to make the change desired—whether that change is in the education, regulatory, security or cultural sectors. Key leader engagements do not obviate the need to build robust grass-roots networks to encourage positive change.

That said, neither approach is ultimately sustainable without the other.

We also found some unexpected blind spots among IRF advocates, who were often unaware of both the geopolitical and religious landscape within Sudan, and tended to over-emphasize the importance of their particular approach. It is unsurprising that most IRF advocates believe what they're doing works, but it does highlight the need for outside-the-box thinking, particularly in regions that are not permissive of religious freedom. Of perhaps greater concern was the informational tunnel vision we saw from some international advocates of IRF. The two most serious knowledge gaps we found in Sudan involved geopolitics and Muslim organizations. Many international advocates, from both the government and non-government sector, tended to de-emphasize the role broader regional dynamics, such as the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict, play within Sudan. More surprisingly, they were also generally unfamiliar with many of the Muslim organizations and Islamic currents that were most important in Sudan. These blind spots illustrate the need for a more holistic examination of what proactive and effective IRF work in the MENA region should look like—not necessarily to change or replace what is already being done in the IRF space, but to identify critical gaps that are not currently being filled, and think strategically about how to fill them.

Notes on Methods and Sources

The secondary literature used in this case study includes both scholarly peer-reviewed sources and, for more recent developments, well-sourced news

articles. The main focus of the research was on interviews and content analysis. A series of interviews were conducted with key local, national, and international leaders in the IRF space, including some contacts provided by RFI as well as others identified to us by interviewees themselves. In general, our sample of interviewees skewed more international than national, and more Christian than Muslim, and so we adjusted for these factors in our analysis. Twelve detailed interviews were conducted, ranging in length from half an hour to two hours. These interviews were then transcribed, scrubbed of identifying data, and provided to a series of volunteer coders—mostly graduate students with at least some background in either religious freedom, Islamic political thought, or both. To ensure inter-coder reliability, each interview was coded by at least two different coders, and a composite score was derived. We would like to thank all of our interviewees and coders for their valuable time and insights.

The purpose of this content analysis was two-fold: first, to gain a better assessment of facts on the ground in Sudan; and second, to gain an assessment of perceptions of Sudan from within the IRF community. In the end, valuable information was gained about Sudan itself, but our investigators found some of the data regarding perceptions among IRF activists to be equally interesting—particularly when compared to broader analyses of secondary literature regarding conditions in Sudan. Both quotes from the interviews and elements of the content analysis will be presented throughout this case study.



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