

Documenting Changes in Religious Freedom Conditions in Sudan





The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a source of national and international security.



The Initiative for Religious Freedom (TIRF) is a coalition of like-minded advocacy organizations and individuals proactively pursuing religious freedom for all in the Greater Middle East region. We are committed to strategic, proficient, outcome-focused activities to achieve real change.

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Abstract

This case study analyzes the changing religious freedom landscape in Sudan. Previously one of the world's worst offenders where IRF is concerned, Sudan has seen substantial shifts on IRF policy under the auspices of the new transitional government. Questions remain as to how durable and pervasive these shifts will prove, and what, if any, lessons may be drawn from this case. To answer these questions, our team conducted a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the IRF community, Sudanese religious leaders, aid and development practitioners, and others. These interviews were then analyzed, and the analysis was supplemented with secondary academic research. The study concludes with practical suggestions to consolidate IRF in Sudan, best practices that can be applied to other cases, and constructive critiques with respect to blind spots in the IRF discourse that emerged in our research.

Acronym and Glossary of Key Terms

CPA:	Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2005
CPC:	Country of Particular Concern, a designation for religious freedom violators by the U.S. State Department under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998
DUP:	Democratic Unionist Party
IRF:	International Religious Freedom
MENA:	Middle East and North Africa
NIF:	National Islamic Front
RSF:	Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary organization of the Sudanese government administered by the National Intelligence and Security Service
SPLA:	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM:	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
USCIRF:	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



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Introduction



The establishment of a civil, democratic, federal State in Sudan, wherein, the freedom of religion, the freedom of belief and religious practices and worship shall be guaranteed to all Sudanese people by separating the identities of culture, region, ethnicity and religion from the State. No religion shall be imposed on anyone and the State shall not adopt any official religion. The State shall be impartial in terms of religious matters and matters of faith and conscience. The State shall guarantee and protect the freedom of religion and practices. These principles shall be enshrined in the constitution.”

Declaration of Principles between the Transitional Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North, 28th March 2021.

Signatories:

*Gen. Abdulfatah El-Burhan Abdulrahman
Chairman, Transitional Sovereign Council, Republic of Dusan*

*CDR. Abdalaziz Adam Al-Hilu
Chairman, Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army – North*

Witnesses:

*Gen. Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of the Republic of South Sudan
Gov. David M. Beasley, Executive Director, World Food Program*

The commitment outlined above is remarkable. “The freedom of belief and religious practices and worship shall be guaranteed to all Sudanese people.” For decades Sudan has been the site of some of the most egregious violations of religious freedom imaginable.

From 1999 to 2019, the State Department designated Sudan as a Country of Particular Concern for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has previously described the government

of Sudan as the “world’s most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief” (USCIRF, 2001).

As interviewees in this report highlight, the realities included physical violence and arrests, destruction of houses of worship to abusive blasphemy and apostasy laws, hostile and discriminatory rhetoric, and the denial of fundamental rights and freedoms on account of someone’s religious beliefs or lack thereof.

In addition, the violent imposition of religious law, mixed with ethnic division, raw politics, and other factors set the conditions for genocidal violence on multiple occasions in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and elsewhere. These realities make it no surprise that Sudan hosted, incubated, and exported some of the most destructive Islamist terrorists over the past decades.

Yet now there are reasons for cautious optimism that genuine change may be possible. Securing any of these changes will require not only words on paper, but changes in actions that extend to the everyday interactions between citizens and government and security services. Pressure from civil society leaders and religious communities must continue to be empowered to hold their political leaders to account.

The purpose of this case study analyzing the changing religious freedom landscape in Sudan is threefold:

- To analyze what has happened in Sudan over the last few years and what factors contributed to the changes which have occurred;

- To assess Sudan’s future prospects for maintaining or continuing to improve upon positive momentum;
- To identify possible best practices from Sudan that can inform the efforts of individuals and organizations working to promote religious freedom in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond.

As the report makes clear, while progress has been made there are still numerous reasons for concern that these trends could be reversed. Nor was there any single factor that can be identified as decisive, but rather the changes identified were a convergence of domestic, regional, and international factors that included political, religious, military, and civilian actors all playing a role. There is no “silver bullet” strategy that can be packaged and exported from country to country, but the lessons learned in one place should inform and encourage efforts elsewhere.

Greater awareness of the severity of the problems alone is not enough. Genuine change requires proactive strategies and initiatives tailored to the given conditions in each location that are rooted in deep understanding of the cultural, religious, security, political, and geopolitical factors impacting society and that are accompanied by relationships of respect, trust, and collaboration across religious, ethnic, and political divides.

The findings from this report we hope will contribute to greater understanding for those working to promote greater religious freedom, societal flourishing, and security in Sudan, the Middle East and North Africa, and around the world.

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.

Part I.

The Context of Contemporary Sudan: Demography, History and the Road to the 2019 Revolution

The population of the Republic of Sudan is currently around 45 million people. Ethnically, 70 percent of Sudanese are classified as Sudanese Arab. The black African minority, comprised of peoples including the Fur, Nuba, Beja and Fallata, makes up about 30 percent of the population. Speaking more broadly, Sudan technically contains more than 500 ethnic groups and 400 languages. Religiously speaking, Sunni Islam is by far the most prominent religious group, accounting for 97 percent of the population. Among the Sunni Muslims, Sufi Brotherhoods play an important religious and political role. Christianity and traditional African animism account for the rest of the population. The population of Sudan is also extremely young, with 42 percent being under the age of 15. Fertility rates are about 4.4 births per woman, and the average life expectancy is just under 65 years. Developmentally, much of the country is still agrarian, with 65 percent of the population living in rural areas.

Before delving into the history of Sudan, it is necessary to provide some additional context as to the nature of Sudanese Islam. Like many nations and regions which converted to Islam

through gradual trade and assimilation, Sudanese Islam has incorporated a number of pre-Islamic elements and evolved a broadly Sufi interpretation of the faith (Woodward in Warburg, 1983). As a result, Islam in Sudan has historically been politically and institutionally diffuse, and intimately tied to traditional Sufi “sects” and “holy families,” which gave Sudanese Islam a distinct local character. An integral part of this character was its personalism. To be a North Sudanese Muslim was to be a follower of a certain Sufi leader or family (Voll in Warburg, 1983). As Noah Salomon explains: “If Sunni Islam is known for not having a clergy, Sudanese Islam takes this in an even more robust direction. In Sudan, there is no single paradigmatic institution for the production of Islamic leadership, no al-Azhar as in Egypt, no Qayrawan as in Tunisia. While many have attempted to create such an institution... precisely to guard against the proliferation of claims to Islamic authority, none have been successful.” (Salomon, introduction).

This is not to say that Sufism in Sudan is apolitical. On the contrary, Sudan’s two predominant sects, the Ansar and Khatmiyah, developed political

parties during periods of multi-party democracy, which will be discussed below. Yet even where Sufi groups have been politically engaged, ties of blood, family, and social network can, at times, play a role at least as important as ideology. This is not only true of the Sufis, but of the groups that are outside of the Sufi currents, from the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood to the controversial progressive modernists of the Republican Brotherhood.

In examining the historical context of modern Sudan, the best place to begin is with an enigmatic Muslim figure from the late nineteenth century who brings together several of these trends: The Mahdi. The Mahdi was, as religious leaders went, a somewhat unusual figure. On the one hand, the Mahdi drew on Sudan's Sufi tradition in the creation of his rebellion. In particular, he benefited enormously from the structures of Sufism, with its localized centers of veneration and reliance on "holy families" for leadership (Woodward in Warburg, 1983, Deng, 1995). Even as he benefited from the structures, the Mahdi sought to overturn or modify them. While Sufis are often political quietists, the Mahdi was anything but. In fact, he advocated the creation of an explicitly Islamic state. Like many modernizers, he also sought to create a more firmly Orthodox Sudanese Islam purged of its traditional, pre-Islamic elements (Woodward in Warburg, 1983 and Deng, 1995). The Mahdi at first proved successful in driving the invaders from the country. His forces defeated General Gordon, a famous British commander known for his exploits in China, and proclaimed an Islamic state in Sudan. While the rule of the Mahdi and his successor is remembered by

many Sudanese with fondness, in practical terms, it was devastating, causing famine, starvation, displacement and mass death (Deng, 1995). By the time the British, led by Lord Kitchener, defeated the Mahdists and established the Anglo-Egyptian condominium over Sudan, the Mahdi's revolution had thoroughly played itself out.

In the wake of the Mahdi's rebellion, Sudan passed into the joint rule of the British and Egyptians. Notwithstanding the claims of later Islamists, there was considerable mistrust of Christian missionary societies on the part of colonial officials throughout the empire. This was particularly true in northern Sudan, where British officials, hyper-aware of the remnant of Mahdist sentiment which seethed beneath the surface of the condominium, saw the idea of Christian missionaries on the streets of Khartoum stirring up the Muslims as a horrifying and almost certainly destabilizing prospect. As Robert Collins puts it: "The specter of wild-eyed evangelists roaming the streets of Omdurman exhorting militant Muslims to abandon Islam for Christianity brought stark horror to the minds of the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, Lord Cromer, the British Consul General in Egypt, and Sir Reginald Wingate, Governor-General of the Sudan, all of whom were only too happy to have millions of pagans beyond the sudd whom they repeatedly pointed out were thirsting for the word of Christ." (Collins in Warburg, 1983). By contrast, the pagan south was seen as a safe place to redirect missionary activities (Ibid).

Thus, the British policy in the north was to encourage the growth of an orthodox brand of Islam and closer integration

with Egypt (Woodward and Voll in Warburg, 1983). In the aftermath of the Mahdist state's collapse, a number of related, violent Sufi movements sprang up. These movements were millennial in an odd way, in that they anticipated the return of the Prophet Eisa (Jesus), who would return before the Mahdi to set things right and fight on behalf of the Muslims (Woodward in Warburg, 1983). The British helped orchestrate a condemnation of these movements by various Sudanese religious organizations, and remained wary of Sufi movements. So ubiquitous and powerful were the Sufi organizations and members of the "holy families" however, that this British project remained less than fruitful. In particular, two sects, the Ansar and Khatmiyah, remained quite powerful and influential. Ansar's leadership was directly descended from the Mahdi, while Khatmiyah was a more traditionally Sufi body (Collins in Warburg, 1983). Nevertheless, the British desire for a more orthodox, and manageable Islam in the north would leave a lasting legacy. As Noah Salomon explains: "When the British did not find an orthodox Islam in Sudan, they sought to create it... The modern state the British proposed—with its disciplinary power that sought not only to rule, but also to civilize—could not tolerate alternative loci of power and thus sought to order religion under its management and in its image... By making religion a matter of public concern, and by limiting spiritual practices to a single model that they felt they could more easily co-opt, the British established a blueprint for the relationship between religion and state whose indelible presence can still be felt today." (Salomon, pp. 46-47). Britain pursued this project of legibility

even to the point of attempting to create educational institutions capable of training orthodox Islamic spiritual leaders (Ibid, p. 45). Salomon argues that "while to state that the British "created" the variety of modernist Islam in Sudan that has been embraced by the intellectuals of the Inqadh regime would be an overstatement, the seeds they planted, which were watered and cultivated by a variety of individuals, have contributed greatly to its flowering, as even a cursory look at the CVs of Muslim Brotherhood leaders shows." (Salomon, pp. 45-46).

Of course, British power eventually waned, and in 1956, the Republic of Sudan officially declared independence, under the auspices of a multi-party democracy. By 1958, Sudan saw its first, though far from the last, military coup, a relatively bloodless affair in which General Ibrahim Abboud gained control of the government. Abboud banned all political parties, treated the nascent southern rebel movement as little better than bandits, and censored any news regarding the situation in the south from the Sudanese press (O'Ballance, 2000). In an effort to externalize the conflict, and perhaps gain Islamic credibility, he cracked down on missionaries, expelling most of them, closing their schools and nationalizing education, and imposing a "grass curtain" of silence about the brewing and chaotic civil war in the south (O'Ballance, 2000). Under Abboud, the civilian parties chafed at military rule. After his fall in 1964, coup attempts and changes of government were very common occurrences, and the chaotic period of multi-party democracy would prove brief.



Jaafar Numeiri

Prime Minister, Sudan 1969 - 1985

Jaafar Numeiri became Prime Minister of Sudan following a military coup against Sudan's civilian government in 1969. In 1971 Numeiri became Sudan's President, making him the most powerful individual in the government. His rule was marked by the promotion of Islamic law, and poor regard for Christian minority rights. He was overthrown by a bloodless coup in 1985.

This instability led to another extended period of military rule under Gaafar Mohammed Numeiri. Initially a member of the Sudanese free officer's movement, which enjoyed close ties with Gamal Abdul-Nassir, Numeiri launched his military coup in 1968, seizing the government and proclaiming the formation of a new revolutionary council. Initially, he espoused neutrality in the Cold War and a desire to keep Sudan united. To achieve this outcome, he successively purged both Islamists and communists, leaving him in consolidated control of the north (O'Ballance, 2000). Numeiri's experience fighting in the south led him to understand that military victory was impossible. Thus, he made peace with the southern rebel group and its new

leader, Joseph Lagu, the pro-Western, anti-Communist son of an Anglican lay minister and a former Sudanese army officer who defected to the rebels (O'Ballance, 2000). A peace agreement creating autonomy in the south and a unified army was forged and signed in late February and early March of 1972 (O'Ballance, 2000). Advocates of international religious freedom who were active at the time remember the early Numeiri years favorably. One interviewee described: "I started (my mission work in) 1973, and we mainly worked in Sudan for about 19 years where we did a lot of evangelism and outreach and so on. At that time, there was incredible freedom as the religion of the country was Christianity and Islam, so there was kind of equality. So we

had a lot of freedom to reach out to the people with the message of the gospel and so on.” (Interview conducted April 5, 2021).

Given this history, Numeiri’s eventual decision to impose Sharia law on Sudan in 1983 seems inexplicable. Not only did he come to power, in part, by purging political Islam from the public sphere, but his signature peace deal with the south, which essentially prevented southern secession, was predicated on a degree of southern autonomy, including recognition of the non-Muslim character of the south. Islam held a very strong pull for northern Sudanese, and so ambitious state-builders relied on it, though not exclusively, to define themselves and their new state. However, the antipathy between Numeiri and the dominant Ansar and Khatmiyah sects had previously foreclosed Islam as a viable option for Numeiri to consolidate power. Yet, in the 1980s, a new Islamic current, along with an associated political party, emerged. This was the National Islamic Front, under the leadership of Hasan al-Turabi. The NIF began as the Sudanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and was opposed to the traditional Muslim parties and their somewhat Sufi interpretation of Islam. He and his party were unequivocal about the need for an Islamic state and the imposition of Islamic law. Yet, as John Voll points out, “even the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Sudan, Dr. Hasan al-Turabi, comes from an old prominent religious family in the Gezira area of the Sudan where his ancestor’s tomb is still a respected religious center.” (Voll in Warburg, 1983, p. 133). In this way, al-Turabi’s rise mirrored that of the Mahdi—though he was, if anything,

more uncompromising—and also reflects the broader pattern of Sudanese Islam: networks and familial ties play an outsized role in the country’s Islamic practice.

Yet, the Muslim Brotherhood orientation of Turabi’s movement allowed it to transcend the localized familial networks that defined Ansar and Khatmiyah. Numeiri’s policies inadvertently helped Turabi, as student dissent during the Numeiri years was increasingly channeled in two directions, toward the Communists and toward Islamic radicalism (Deng, 1995, p. 18). With their emphasis on personalism and tradition, the Umma Party and NUP/DUP were perhaps badly positioned to take advantage of this swing. Numeiri’s ruthless suppression of the Communists, in the end, probably benefited the brothers, and later the NIF, more than Numeiri himself. Like many authoritarian leaders in the Muslim world, Numeiri found himself caught in a trap whereby any action taken to weaken opponents on the left strengthened radical Islamist elements, to the point that either a violent campaign of extirpation or some sort of accommodation became an urgent priority. Like most pragmatic Muslim authoritarians, Numeiri decided to accommodate the Islamists (Berkeley, 2001, p. 200). He imposed Shariah and Islamic courts, and began the process of creating an Islamic state.

If the early Numeiri period was something of a golden age for IRF advocates, the later period of Sharia Law was a grim harbinger of things to come. One interviewee recalls that the imposition of Sharia Law actually fueled a life-long commitment to religious freedom: “one of the main things



Hassan al-Turabi

Co-Founder, Muslim Brotherhood, Sudan

Hassan al-Turabi is one of the original founders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan. Turabi heavily influenced Jafaar Nimeiri, the former President of Sudan, pushing Nimeiri to impose Islamic law in Sudan. After Nimeiri's ouster, Turabi remained politically active through his new party, the National Islamic Front (NIF). After Bashir came to power, Turabi inserted himself into Bashir's sphere of influence, working behind the scenes and again advocating for the imposition of Islamic law. A later falling out with Bashir limited Turabi's power in Sudan, though he remained relevant until his death in 2016.

which led me to religious freedom was apostasy and blasphemy laws, because in Islam, you're not allowed to leave Islam. There is a death penalty for leaving Islam in about 13 countries. And one of these countries was Sudan at that time when they applied the Shariah law in 1983 and actually there was an elderly man who was executed. He was over 75. And according to the law in Sudan, you should not be executed if you are over 75. His name was Mahmud Mohammed Taha." (Interview conducted April 5, 2021).

If Turabi and his movement have a counterpart on the other extreme of Sudanese Islam, it is undoubtedly Mahmud Mohammed Taha, and the Republican Brotherhood he founded and led until his execution. Central to the doctrine of the Republican Brotherhood

is "the assertion of a total compatibility between reason and faith. They argue that religion, like science, enables man to relate to the total universe, to Being in all its manifestations. If early man failed to recognize that phenomena could be understood in their immediate causes through reason, and therefore sought all explanations in the divine, modern man has gone to the opposite extreme and eliminated faith from its proper sphere in the false name of science. Despite such aberrations, say the Republicans, the fact remains that there is a legitimate role for both science and faith and both must be utilized for man to reach his destiny. Allah is to be known and reached through knowledge and faith, through intellect and will. Humanity possesses imperfectly what the Creator is: reason



Mahmud Mohammed Taha ***Religious Thinker and Political Leader***

Mahmud Mohammed Taha was a Sudanese religious thinker and political leader. He advocated for an interpretation of Islam that was compatible with tolerance and respect for human rights. His political party, the Republican Brotherhood, was established to further these ideas. In 1985 he was arrested and executed by the Sudanese government under charges of apostasy. The Republican Brotherhood has been mostly irrelevant since his death.

and will. This was the essential message of Mohammed when he held out a new vision of reality to the heathen of his day in Arabia.” (Stevens, 1981). None of this, of course, was sufficient to prevent Taha from being executed. More problematic for many Muslims—even those who are sympathetic to the Republican Brothers—are some of Taha’s other teachings. As Stephens explains: “The Koran itself, according to Republican Brothers teaching, falls into two distinct though not mutually exclusive categories, the Meccan texts and the Medina texts. The difference has not so much to do with the place of revelation but arises from the different levels to which they were addressed. Whereas the earlier Meccan texts were concerned with announcing the fundamentals of faith, with questions

of human freedom and the equality of the sexes, the Medina texts are seen as reflective of the necessity of preserving the new community’s very existence” (Ibid). Unsurprisingly, Taha and the Republican Brothers see the Meccan texts as still operative today, while they view the Medina texts as no longer applicable. This gives even some Sudanese Muslims sympathetic to their program of moral reform pause. As one Muslim interviewee from Sudan explained: “He (Taha) was a brilliant Muslim, a kind of continuation to Sufism tradition in Islam... Yes, I know there is a problem in his discipline. Logical problems, theological problems.” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Still, like Turabi, Taha’s legacy remains important in modern Sudan, particularly after the ouster of Omar Bashir.

Numeiri's Muslim gambit failed and was quickly demonstrated to be the desperate ploy of a military authoritarian on his way out. Within two years, Numeiri had surrendered power to a transitional military council, which in turn held elections and inaugurated a third halting, chaotic, and extremely brief period of democratization. This period was dominated by Sadik al-Mahdi and the Umma Party. Al-Mahdi's rule was highly unstable, consisting of an ever-changing coalition with the DUP, NIF, and SPLA (O'Ballance, 2000). Yet after four years of intermittent and increasingly brutal fighting, al-Mahdi formed a coalition with the DUP dedicated to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The issue which had made such a formation problematic in the four-year interim was, not surprisingly, Islamic

law. Al-Mahdi knew that sharia would not be acceptable to the south, but, given his dissent from the Mahdi and his reliance on this prestige, he would not or perhaps could not be the one to end it (O'Ballance, 2000). At last, however, he became convinced that Islamic law must be eliminated, at least in the south, and that the notion of an Islamic state was too divisive. Al-Mahdi's government and SPLA leader John Garang were quite close to a peace deal in 1989, when a military coup put a stark end to the prospect.

The coup of 1989 inaugurated the rule of the National Islamic Front, and the dictatorship of Omar Bashir. This was a watershed moment for Sunni Islamists. As Salomon explains: "Twenty-one years before the Arab Spring that would



Omar Bashir

President, Sudan, 1989 - 2019

Omar al-Bashir came to power after leading the overthrow of Sudan's government in 1989. During his rule, Bashir consolidated power by banning political parties and dissolving the parliament. He was supported by Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the National Islamic Front, and worked to impose Islamic law throughout Sudan. While elections were conducted under his rule, they were widely regarded as fraudulent. Al-Bashir maintained control until he was ousted by Sudanese security forces in 2019.

bring to power Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt (however briefly) and increase the sway of Islamic politics in countries from Jordan to Morocco, seventeen years before Hamas won overwhelming electoral victories in the Occupied Territories, thirteen years before even Turkey's Justice and Development Party had accomplished its victory in general elections, and many years before ISIS and the Taliban would come into existence, Sudan's NIF was ahead of the curve, transitioning from a movement of Islamic opposition to a governing force" (Salomon, p. 62). The external perception of the regime is that of unremitting Islamism from 1989 until its ouster in 2019. To a certain extent, this impression is quite correct. Under Bashir, Islamism became a pervasive and stultifying political discourse: "Actors who previously had little political involvement were suddenly pulled into a political conversation they had not created but to which they came to contribute in increasingly creative ways by dint of their authority within the Islamic tradition. People who had understood themselves for generations as anti-Islamist began to express their political participation in Islamic terms, as the only recognized language of political discourse increasingly became that of Islam." (Salomon, introduction). Yet, on the other hand, the Islamist dictatorship went through several phases. The first phase lasted from 1989 until approximately 2000. During this time, Bashir and Turabi positioned Sudan as the vanguard of the global Islamic revolution (Prendergast, 2002). This included a highly confrontational attitude toward status quo states in the MENA region (Ibid, see also Rubin, chapter 4), and what can only be described as a genocidal jihad in the

south. Internationally, Sudan allied itself with Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Prendergast, 2002), cultivated ties to Iran, and most notoriously, hosted Osama Bin-Laden throughout much of the 1990s. Hosting Bin-Laden also alienated the United States and Egypt, particularly after a failed assassination attempt against Hosni Mubarak in which the Sudanese government was implicated (Lobban and Fluehr Lobban, 2001). For its trouble, Sudan was blacklisted as a state sponsor of terrorism and faced sanctions from the U.S.

The second phase saw Bashir attempt to pivot internationally in the aftermath of 9/11. Bashir saw an opening to improve relations with the US, and dove through it with alacrity. He removed al-Turabi from his government position, placing him under arrest, and offered his aid to the United States against al-Qaeda. Subsequently, Bashir would sign the comprehensive peace agreement with the south, beginning a six-year process that culminated in the 2011 independence vote. Yet, Bashir also began an active campaign against rebel groups in Darfur that brought international condemnation due to its broad scope and near genocidal severity.

The third phase, like the second, was full of contradictions. Running from 2011 to 2019, this third phase saw policies that veered between international conciliation and domestic conflict. With the south gone and the Darfur conflict having gained considerable international attention, Bashir pivoted to the Nuba Mountains, an area that had been a zone of conflict throughout the entirety of his regime. Internationally, on the other hand, Bashir began to seek increased

ties with the status quo powers in the region—particularly Egypt and the Gulf—as a hedge against Iran and its allies. This also led to a push for normalization on the part of several Western governments, including those in the United States.

At no point, of course, did Bashir or his regime abandon the Islamist project. Rather, these three phases can be seen as variations in intensity and, to a certain extent, displays of intent. The regime certainly seems to have believed its own ideology in the first phase, mixed in a healthy dose of racist nationalism in

the second, and seems to have been motivated almost entirely by power politics in the third. In short, by the mid-2010s, a discernible exhaustion with Islamism on the part of regime elites was detectable—though at no time did this actually seem to drive concrete relaxation of the Islamist ideology.

Unsurprisingly, conditions for international religious freedom were extremely poor throughout Bashir's rule. Figure one shows the areas in which interviewees saw the most serious IRF violations during Bashir's regime.

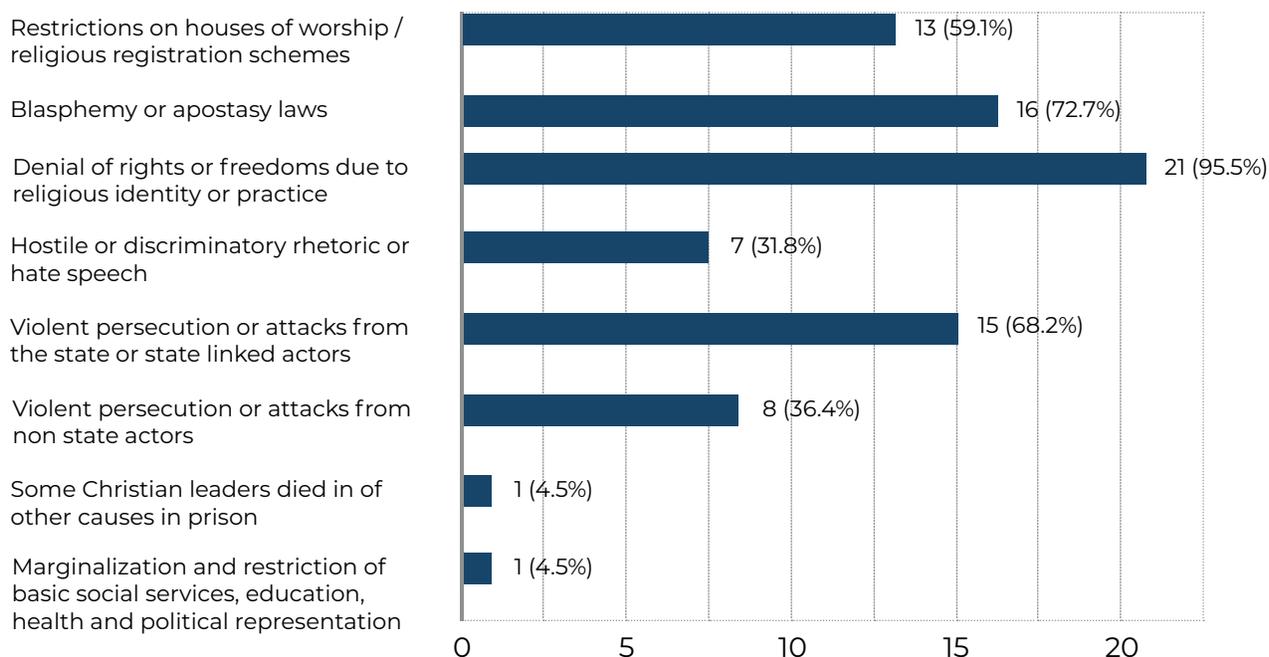
Spotlight

Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)

The 2005 Sudanese Comprehensive Peace Agreement was forged in response to the decades of civil war that gripped Sudan. The nature of the conflict was especially brutal, pitting the Arab/Islamic north against the African/Christian south. The agreement contained several provisions. First, it laid out a plan for the north and south to share power and oil revenues. This provision was vital, considering oil accounted for a large percentage of government income and the vast majority of oil fields were located in the south. Second, the agreement granted the south greater political autonomy with the creation of the southern regional government. Third, the agreement included a permanent ceasefire between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army. Unfortunately, violations were numerous. Fourth, and most importantly, the agreement allowed for southern Sudan to hold a referendum on independence in 2011. Ultimately, the south voted overwhelmingly for independence, thus creating the Republic of South Sudan.

Figure 1

Which of the following aspects or elements of religious freedom restrictions or persecution did the interviewee mention as concerns in Sudan under the previous regime? (Please select all that apply). 22 responses.



Of those interviewed, 59.7% mentioned restrictions on houses of worship, 72.7% mentioned blasphemy or apostasy laws, 95.5% mentioned denial of rights and freedoms due to religious identity or practice, 31.8% mentioned hostile rhetoric and hate speech, 68.2% mentioned violent persecution by the state, 36.4 mentioned persecution from non-state actors, 4.5% mentioned the imprisonment and death of Christian pastors, and 4.5% mentioned restrictions from social services, education, healthcare, and political representation.

The Islamist ideology of the regime was the proximate cause of these IRF violations. Interviewees and secondary sources alike describe a pervasive ideology akin to other twentieth-century forms of totalitarianism, which was operative in every aspect of society. As

one interviewee explained: “they wanted to tell you how to dress, how to play, which music you listen to, which cinema you watch, they determine the political system, the economic system, every sphere of life... You had no moral choice at all, just a robot or animal. And this is typical for a religious totalitarian regime” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). At the core of the ideology, as experienced by the Sudanese, was “hatred against the other. The other Christian, the other Jew, the other female, and so on” (Ibid). Of course, these violations were not limited to Christians. Just as was the case with Mahmud Mohammed Taha under Numeiri’s experiment with Shari’a, Islam was very strictly regulated, as our interviewee, himself a practicing Muslim, explained, “We all know that there are many possible interpretations of Islam. There is Salafi interpretation of Islam,

Spotlight

Miriam Ibrahim

Several interviewees mentioned the catalyzing impact the case of Miriam Ibrahim had on their work in Sudan. The daughter of a Muslim father, Ibrahim was accused of apostasy while eight months pregnant, and sentenced to death. The case gained international attention, leading many interviewees in the NGO sector to become deeply involved. As one interviewee explained: “I think dealing with an individual case always helps to bring out the issue. Especially because she was pregnant, she had a child, she was put in prison, she had her baby in prison, all because she, in a way, left Islam. Her father is a Muslim. And she had to be a Muslim within the Shariah law, that she should die because she left Islam. She was accused of apostasy because she married a non-Muslim, because a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim.” (Interview conducted April 5, 2021). Several interviewees were closely involved with the Miriam Ibrahim case. One particular interviewee emphasized an approach of personal diplomacy based on long-standing relationships: “I flew over there and it was during Ramadan. And every night I would have an Iftar dinner with this same Sudanese foreign minister, Ali Karti. And I said, this is really not good for the nation of Sudan. You have this woman that’s locked up. She has her two year old in prison. She is eight months pregnant and you want to hang her by the neck. And so every day I was advocating, I was advocating for her.” (Interview conducted March 16, 2021). Others emphasized international advocacy campaigns: “We did a lot



of campaigns for her... I saw her story and then we protested in front of the Sudanese embassy in Cairo, we presented a letter to the ambassador, we wrote a letter campaign to the to the government. Also, we presented some letters to the embassy in Sweden, and did even more things in other places. But we were mainly involved with the embassy in Cairo and writing to the government officials within Sudan.” (Interview conducted April 5, 2021). Still others highlighted the role of training and education in equipping local Muslim actors to advocate on Miriam’s behalf: “even in Miriam’s case, they were able to argue in such a way that got the Umma Party to defend her. And if you recall, the people standing outside of her courthouse holding up signs, they were mostly students that were trained by people we trained and they were all Muslim and they were saying, we are Miriam, she deserves religious freedom. This is not Islam. And so they found

their own language for it.” (Interview conducted March 26, 2021). Generally, interviewees believed the Miriam Ibrahim case impacted them, and their work, in varying ways. Some emphasized the impact on their personal IRF work. As one interviewee said, in a quote that was representative of broader sentiments, the Miriam Ibrahim case “really helped me to understand the situation in Sudan... that, hey, if they’re going to do this to this woman, what are they going to do to others?” (Interview conducted March 16, 2021). Others argued that this prominent case played an important role in the later removal of the death penalty for apostasy after the revolution: “I think Miriam’s case had a huge part to

play in that (getting the death penalty for apostasy removed) because many people don’t know about the death penalty for apostasy, because obviously it’s rarely applied... because Miriam took a stand, she really put a light on that law. And I mean, I thank God for her bravery because otherwise I don’t think things would have changed there because it brought international attention. The fact that she was a woman and that she was pregnant at the time, it really brought that law up front and also showed what happens when it’s applied. And that made other countries raise this issue.” (Interview conducted April 1, 2021).

Muslim brothers, Islamism, Islamist interpretation of Islam, and there are other humane or democratic or modern interpretations of Islam. They suppress all these (humane) interpretations of Islam... Any interpretation that is democratic is always linked to the West and the Zionist crusader conspiracy... So they (were) categorized as being agents of the West, agents of Zionism, and so on. So this (was) constant” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Outside observers noted “prejudice against the black African Sudanese by a regime that believed that it was really Arab and not African. Jihad was declared against the people who would not kowtow to the government’s wishes which brought about rebellion against Islamism in Sudan.” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021).

The situation in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains would prove highly indicative of the ebb and flow of religious freedom violations under Bashir, and so Nuba is worth discussing as a case study. The beginning of a 1993 Fatwah from the regime regarding jihad in Nuba reads as follows: “The rebels in Southern Kordofan (Nuba Mountains) or in Southern Sudan have rebelled against the state and have waged war against Muslims, with their prime objective being the killing and massacring of Muslims, the destruction of mosques, the burning [of] copies of the Quran, and violating the honour and dignity of Muslims, while the rebels are being driven and instigated by the enemies of Islam from amongst the Zionists, the Christian Crusaders, and the forces of arrogance, who have been

supplying them with food and arms. Therefore, the rebels who are Muslims and are fighting against the state are hereby declared apostates from Islam, and the non-Muslims are hereby declared kaffirs (infidels) who have been standing up against the efforts of preaching, proselytization, and spreading Islam into Africa. However, Islam has justified the fighting and the killing of both categories without any hesitation whatsoever” (quoted from Manger, p. 133).

By all available evidence, the Bashir regime pursued this jihad with all the fury this fatwah suggests. Interviewees familiar with conditions in the Nuba mountains told stories of “churches being forced to close, but the leaders of those churches still coming and opening them and then immediately being beaten, dragged behind vehicles tortured. We heard several stories of unbelievable torture, people being shot, imprisoned as a result of opening the churches” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Things changed after the 2005 CPA: “When 2005 came, there was more freedom. But of course, after years and years of persecution and oppression, I would say that, you know, while there was freedom, there are still some things that happen. And I believe things like racism and religious persecution were still in the hearts of the people who perpetrated some of these attacks... but there was more freedom to move around at that time. We rebuilt over 160 churches permanently that were destroyed during the war and we rebuilt those in the Nuba Mountains at that time... People had more ability to do things, I think... to move and have churches come together across the front lines” (Ibid). Yet, peace in Nuba would prove short-lived, with warning signs of impending conflict appearing as early as 2011. “The president at the time was saying genocidal things and stirring up problems as the new South Sudan was going to split and they felt like even though Nuba was in Sudan, they felt like they can run it over. And he was verbalizing this in speeches. We started seeing soldiers moving in areas that you didn’t see them before. So we knew the war was coming. And sure enough, on June six, 2011, the war started immediately” (Ibid).

Once again, Bashir’s government made the deliberate destruction of Christianity in Nuba a cornerstone of its war policy—despite the fact that an estimated 70% of Nuba’s population is Muslim.

“ The Islamist ideology of the regime was the proximate cause of these IRF violations. Interviewees and secondary sources alike describe a pervasive ideology akin to other twentieth-century forms of totalitarianism, which was operative in every aspect of society. As one interviewee explained: “they wanted to tell you how to dress, how to play, which music you listen to, which cinema you watch, they determine the political system, the economic system, every sphere of life... You had no moral choice at all, just a robot or animal. And this is typical for a religious totalitarian regime.”

Interview conducted April 10, 2021.

Spotlight

Nuba Mountains

The Nuba Mountains are one of the most unique regions in all of Sudan. They boast significant religious and ethnic diversity, housing Muslims, Christians, Arabs and Black Africans. Additionally, the region is known for a remarkable degree of tolerance and cohabitation. Even so, the location of the Nuba Mountains made them a flashpoint during the Second Sudanese Civil War as they sit squarely between the Muslim North and Christian South. Following the Southern independence referendum in 2011, the Sudanese Government prevented the Nuba from seceding with the South. In response, the Nuba formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North and mounted an armed resistance. The Sudanese Government responded with shock and awe, targeting civilians with aerial bombings. In March of 2021, a permanent ceasefire was signed (Declaration of Principles) between the SPLM-N and Sudanese Government based on a promise by the Sudanese Government to formally separate religion and state in the constitution once it is formed.



“The very next day after the fighting started, airplanes came and started bombing. Then over time, there was bombing almost on a daily basis for the next three years. Some of those bombs were targeted at churches and the bombs did hit some of the churches that we’d constructed. We have video footage of soldiers going into villages, burning the villages down, and then going. Then we went into these similar villages or some of the same exact villages that we have video footage of the soldiers burning down the villages... And then we see the destruction of the homes, the schools, and the churches. So they would go many times and rip all of the roofing off, take all of the seats out, burn all the books, take the windows and doors off of the churches and just leave like a skeleton of a building, and that was very common. So this was how

it was for the next, let’s say, from 2011 up until about twenty seventeen, there was full-on war” (Ibid).

Perversely, it seems as though the net effect, within Nuba, may have been to strengthen support for religious freedom. «Nuba is unique because even though people have said about 70 percent of Nuba are Muslim, there has always been a mutual respect because they’ve all been persecuted and attacked. So the Bashir regime always used religion, geography, ethnicity as a way of dividing people. And so I think that actually had an adverse side effect, and people actually were united as a result of all of this. So, when you ask someone in Nuba, what tribe are you from? They would always say Nuba first... And as a result, they learn this mutual respect of Christianity and Islam. And it’s also known that Christianity has



Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo

a.k.a. Hemedti

Deputy Chairman, Sovereignty Council

Hemedti currently serves as the Deputy Chairman of Sudan’s Sovereignty Council. He also remains the commander of Sudan’s paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, a group accused of committing crimes against humanity. He was involved in the ousting of al-Bashir in 2019, and is considered a major player in Sudanese politics.

been in the Nuba Mountains longer than Islam has. People do understand a little bit about how Islam came to Nuba. They know the history of how it was very much forced upon the people. And so even though they're Muslims, many of them are Muslims, they know that history. And it creates a question. So I think that there's that aspect to it as well, so that dynamic of having a Muslim government that's attacking you as Muslims and yelling verses from the Koran and yelling Allahu Akbar while burning your village down, it tends to make you question and think differently about your beliefs and who brought it to you» (interview conducted April 15, 2021).

As the Bashir regime entered the second half of its third decade, it seems to have fallen victim to a common trend among revolutionary regimes: ideological fatigue. Even as they relied on Islamism—leavened with a healthy dose of Arabism—as a means of maintaining domestic legitimacy, Bashir and his subordinates sought normalization with both the West and the status quo block in the MENA region. As one interviewee explained the regime's calculation, «because they were punished by the West, some of them realized that it is better to bend to the storm. They wanted to consolidate their power in Sudan, and later on, continue their Islamization of the region and Islamization of the world. And so they started that kind of flirt with the West handing over terrorists and certain information and so on» (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). In the latter, they would prove quite successful. Sudan sent troops to fight in the Saudi-Emirati war against the Houthis in Yemen (Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, European Council on Foreign Relations). This brought Hemedti, the head of the paramilitary

RSF, into the orbit of the Emiratis. The RSF were an expression of the regime's ethnic policy, pithily summarized by one outside observer as «use a slave to kill a slave» (Berkley, 2001; see also interview conducted February 17, 2021). Often comprised of conscripts—sometimes children—from peripheral ethnic areas, the RSF was known for some of the worst abuses in several of the civil wars. It was this force that Bashir sent to fight in Yemen. At the same time, elements of Sudan's military developed close ties to Egypt (Ibid).

Though many of our interviewees seemed unaware of these dynamics, observers with a background of having lived in Sudan, and those who live in the country now, were more sensitive to these issues. An interviewee who grew up in Sudan mentioned, almost in passing, the pragmatic interest the Gulf countries had in Sudan. «Sudan is a very strategic country, including South Sudan, in terms of having access to the whole of the continent of Africa and at the same time is a passage to the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. So the strategy that you see, recent peace agreements, recent funding of all the peace agreements, whether Doha, Qatar or UAE, all of them, they are there and they are flushing money into the system. Then you will ask yourself, who are they giving the money to? What is their agenda and its Islamic base?» (Observer Interview conducted March 8, 2021). In addition, one local national interviewee broke down the dynamics within the security forces in some detail as follows: «there were different centers (of power in the security forces). In 2018 there was a center trying to get rid of Bashir. And it wanted to undertake a kind of change which is controlled. They sought to deceive the people of Sudan that this is a

new regime. So a kind of deception. They wanted to get rid of Bashir but not the regime. And in this scenario, there are two options also. There is the Bashir center, which is generally related to the Qatari, Turkey, Iranian axis. And there is another center which is generally critical to Iran. And they believe that is a reason to give certain concessions to Saudi Arabia and Egypt and to some extent, the Emirates can be tolerated. And this is a pragmatic choice for them. And this center is weak. The center that favors Qatar, Iran and Turkey is stronger... There is Hemedti, the leader of RSF, rapid support forces... was related to the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. And Burhan also is related to... well now he's related more to Egypt... but at that time he was related mainly to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. And the chief of staff of the army at that time called Kamal Abdel Marouf, is related to Iran" (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

This complex internal dynamic is a vitally important context for understanding the success of the 2019 Sudanese Revolution. Interviewees expressed many different views as to the causes of the revolution, but most of them placed their emphasis on the protesters in the streets. As one interviewee expressed the general sentiment: "Well, it was very clear to me when the revolution started that the people of Sudan, regardless of any religious affiliation, they agreed on one thing, that is, they need to remove al-Bashir... because of this lack of freedom, whether it is religious freedom, freedom of speech, or other kinds of freedoms, or also the tough economic situation in the country as well... So I knew at that time this Bashir regime actually was coming to an end. It took some time actually, to throw out al-Bashir. So when that happened and knowing the people

behind the revolution, I knew that it is going to be an opening for religious freedom, which is a critical freedom that could help not only to allow those who were persecuted to practice freely, but even to serve to advance other things in the country" (Interview conducted March 8, 2021). Another interviewee agreed: "I think the slogans of the revolution, equality and justice and peace, it was really focusing on the cause, that the Islamists should be taken out. Some people said it was about food, but actually it was really about freedom. So I think that was the difference. And I heard afterwards, of course, the women were leading it... many university students were involved, young people, and they really want to see a change... And also that everyone was meeting openly and they were able to have services on the street. I mean, you could see it in the way the protests looked. And I know many people say, oh, yeah, that happened in Tahrir as well. But it was peaceful" (Interview conducted April 1, 2021).

Others credited the CPA period as an incubator of democracy: "During the CPA people had their minds open to democracy and human rights in a way that they hadn't under an oppressive Sudan, and that window and door allowed us to reach in and to build upon it with an understanding of freedom of religion and from that they just did what they do best" (Interview conducted March 26, 2021). Still, others credited a combination of political savvy, economic dislocation, and increased information: "The citizens in Sudan are politically savvy and engaged. I knew from high school they always knew how to advocate for their rights, and even though they were oppressed, there was a pressure. The economic sanctions played a big role in weakening

the political strength of Bashir. The information that was coming out to the media about religious oppressions also put more pressure on Bashir. So the strong will of the Sudanese people and their knowledge, their advocacy strength, played a big role for them to come out. They had also a very strong Diaspora. The Sudanese Diaspora also funded and moved out in big numbers during that transition towards the offset of Bashir” (Interview conducted with IRF observer, March 8, 2021). Indeed, one interviewee directly attributed Sudan’s economic problems to ideology: “for the Islamists, of course, one of their main ideas is that you should not borrow from Western civilization. You should reinvent the wheel. So they destroyed the accounting system in the country and the accountability system, which was inherited from the British civil service, so we had endemic corruption. So because of corruption and mismanagement and high expenditures on defense and security, they failed economically. And especially, they failed to provide employment for the young generations before the uprising. There were statistics that about 40 percent of university students were unemployed. If you want to be employed, you have to be a member of their party or immigrate outside the country” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

At the same time, many interviewees also hinted at the internal dynamics discussed above. One observer described the attitude of regime elites toward Bashir this way: “My sense is just that they were tired of him. He had become sort of a king and was trying to consolidate power. It was sort of like Mubarak, like he had overplayed his hand and that had made Sudan such a pariah that they realized, hey, we can cut this guy off and bring in some of these protesters, we

can kind of reset ourselves in the world” (Interview conducted March 10, 2021). Another interviewee from the NGO sector described this strategy in similar terms: “I think they were willing to make Bashir the scapegoat and the sacrifice. Another saying from Sudan is change the face so you can deceive, or at least partly deceive, the world into thinking things will be different” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021). If this was the intent, one interviewee explained: “they didn’t calculate for two things. They didn’t calculate for the amount of Sudanese people against them and they didn’t calculate the regional factor because the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt knew about this scenario and intended to interrupt it. So the ordinary Sudanese people, because of the direct economic crisis, went to the streets. And instead of having a military security apparatus which is unified, there were splits between the centers of power among the military security apparatus, and because of this, there are many factions which paved the road to the success of the uprising” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). The same interviewee described the internal machinations in detail, and so his account is worth quoting at length: “The strategy of the Islamists was that during the demonstrations, at some point, Kamal Abdel Marouf will come in saying that he supported the people and control the transition. And again he was trained in Iran, you could say he has a gold medal from Iran... Then Hemedti, with an order from the Emirates, he blocked Kamal Abdel Marouf... A lot of conflicts resulted finally in the collapse of the system of order in the military security apparatus. And then the Iranian center failed to capture power. And Bashir, the Bashir faction, heard about the Islamist conspiracy to get rid of him. Actually, in December he intentionally made

the RSF the main power in Khartoum, because there are a lot of Islamists among the army, a lot of Islamists among security, so he depended mainly on the RSF to protect him against his own people, the Islamists. So at the moment of the takeover, the balance of power in Khartoum favored the RSF, which is related to the Emirates. In the end, they failed politically, economically, morally, and they felt the need to solve their problems as a movement peacefully. And so they plotted against each other, faction against another” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

Thus, the ouster of Bashir, and the development of the current balance of power in Sudan, can only be described as multi-causal. To be sure, the effectiveness

of the Sudanese people in the civilian sector caught both external observers and the regime itself off-guard. At the same time, it seems unlikely that the Forces for Freedom and Change would have made as much progress as they did were it not for the fragmentation within the security apparatus. This fragmentation, in turn, was driven by regional dynamics—most prominently Sudan’s strategic location and history within the Islamist world on one hand, and the regional cold war between the Iranian block and the status quo Sunni Arabs—embodied in Sudan by Egypt, the UAE and, to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia—on the other. In analyzing the current reality and future prospects of IRF in Sudan, then, it is necessary to keep all of these factors in mind.

“ Well, it was very clear to me when the revolution started that the people of Sudan, regardless of any religious affiliation, they agreed on one thing, that is, they need to remove al-Bashir... because of this lack of freedom, whether it is religious freedom, freedom of speech, or other kinds of freedoms, or also the tough economic situation in the country as well... So I knew at that time this Bashir regime actually was coming to an end.



Part II.

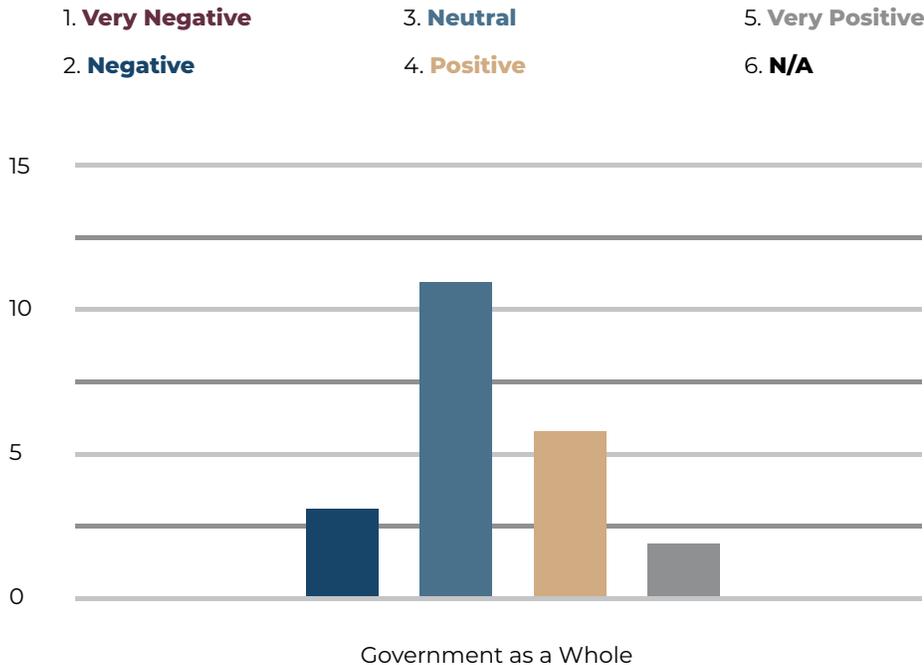
Assessment of Current Conditions in Sudan

The Sudanese Revolution occurred in a compressed timeline, with many similarities to the events of the Arab Spring almost ten years earlier. Consequently, the transformation of IRF in Sudan has come very swiftly in the wake of Bashir's ouster, with steps that are quite clear and significant. Many of our interviewees with decades of experience working on IRF issues indicated their surprise at how far the issue has advanced. "Removing the death penalty for blasphemy," as one interviewee pointed out, "has happened nowhere. The trend is to go the other way. We wish they removed the whole crime, but any kind of dilution of the penalty for that is a big deal" (Interview conducted on March 10, 2021). In describing the Declaration of Principles signed by Hamdok and Burhan with the SPLM, one interviewee declared: "I feel more hopeful now than I have in the past eight years as a result of that" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Still, not all interviewees painted a rosy picture, and even those who were optimistic still had concerns. As one interviewee put it: "I think the failure right now is... the US basically forced Sudan last year to adopt religious freedom in its constitution. And everyone is praising this. They did it so they wouldn't be labeled a state sponsor of terrorism. They didn't do it out of some altruistic belief that this is the

right thing. And so in a few years, if they don't make it... that failure is on us, it's not on them, because once again, we've gone in and said "just sign on the dotted line, say you care, and all of a sudden everything's great, hunky dory." 'We can all sing Kumbaya, move on.' It's a false sense of security in the country. It's very important that these conversations aren't just being had at a government level of what is required to be a part of the global network of free and fair nations, but that it's part of the real concerns and root causes are addressed within the people that are making those decisions and then at a ground level, the society. And that's just not taking place right now" (Interview conducted March 26, 2021).

What follows is a breakdown of our interviewees' perception of how helpful various actors within Sudanese government and society have been in promoting religious freedom. Interviews were coded on a scale of 1-5 with a low score indicating a negative perception and a high score indicating a positive perception. Each interview was coded twice. The figures below represent the raw scores for each of these figures, while the accompanying composite score averages together the scores from all of the interviewees who discussed a given figure or entity.

Figure 2



The composite score of the government is 3.3, indicating an overall impression that is neutral to slightly positive.

Interviewees expressed cautious optimism about the government as a whole. One interviewee from the U.S. government was particularly surprised by how far the transitional government was willing to go on religious freedom: “Once we started dealing with the new government, there was just this urgency on their side to address everything they possibly could do to get them off blacklists and bad lists and have them re-enter the global community. So, you know, we’d often be surprised with how far they were willing to go, how much they would commit to in meeting. And, of course, you hear countries that commit to a lot of things and nothing happens. It’s trust

but verify. But they would often follow through” (Interview conducted March 10, 2021). Other interviewees described the government as having “done a good job so far, but still there is work to be done because the religious minorities there don’t think they are having equal treatment” (Interview with IRF observer conducted on March 8, 2021). Others had a more negative view, with one interviewee arguing that “Now, I personally consider it worse... regarding the relationship between the religious community or the churches and the government, the relationship has been broken because of the government. This government came and tried to implement something

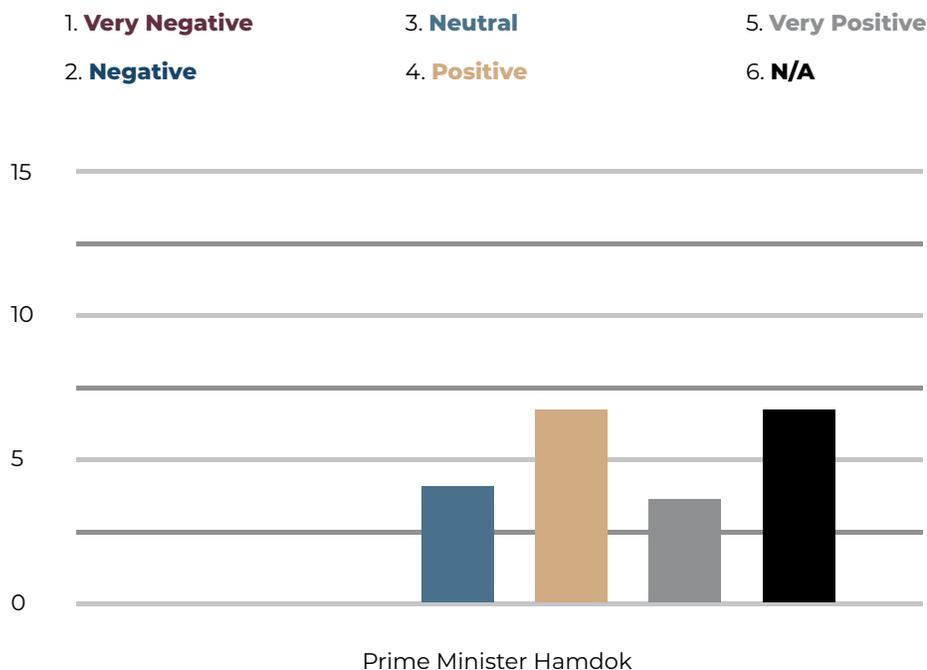
that is not suitable with the culture, the religious culture of the Sudanese people, either Muslims or Christians. And they're trying to have a hand over the churches and mosques" (Interview conducted March 18, 2021). This perspective was an outlier among those we interviewed. Others took more of a cautious view of the government as a whole: "The whole point of the civilian government is they're supposed to lead things to an election. Well, what does that mean for the current leaders in the country, including Burhan?"

And at the end, are they going to be willing to let this process go forward? Will they see it as a way of stripping their power? And how are they going to react to that? That is another thing that I think is a bigger issue" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Another interviewee took a similar approach: "I've been very cautious and cynical, but at the same time saying, hey, get what you can get while you can get it. And I think that's how the people in Sudan are acting and believing" (Interview conducted February 17, 2021).

4.2

Prime Minister Hamdok

Figure 3



The composite score of Prime Minister Hamdok is 4.0, indicating an overall impression that was positive.

Abdallah Hamdok is the quintessential technocrat. With a PHD in economics from Manchester, he has over thirty years of experience working for a host of well-known NGO and quasi-governmental organizations on development issues across Africa. On the whole, impressions of Hamdok ranged from positive to very positive. One interviewee described Hamdok as follows: “Generally, he is a democrat. He is like us, at a certain point he was a communist. He graduated like us from communism years ago, and he is a democrat, a genuine democrat... the significance of Hamdok is that he doesn’t mind to clearly align himself with the West, which is the democratic force” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Another interviewee emphasized that Hamdok

is “trying to adjust, but he has problems uprooting the former system. The former system has grounded itself. And so we still have roots. And until you deal with these roots, you don’t have a resolution to the problem. Any time the environment is conducive for the roots to grow, they’ll grow. And so Hamdok is trying” (Interview with observer conducted on March 8, 2021). Another interviewee believed Hamdok was “sincere, but he’s hampered and he is being used for window dressing by the military guys. He’s their token who believes in tolerance and religious freedom. And the other guys think that they’re going to continue on” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021). Even his supporters expressed some reservations: “his abilities are problematic, his



Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok

Prime Minister, Sudan

Prime Minister Hamdok has a background in economics, receiving his PhD and MA in Economics in the U.K. Prior to serving as Prime Minister, he worked on African economic development and democracy issues with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), and at International IDEA. Hamdok also served as Finance Minister under al-Bashir, but was fired because of his refusal to affiliate with Bashir’s Islamic movement. Hamdok was appointed to be Prime Minister by Sudan’s Sovereignty Council on August 20, 2019. He was sworn in on the following day.

decisiveness is problematic, he has a lot of problems. But he is the most powerful civilian. According to the constitutional document, he has the most power. But he is not using his powers rightfully and he is the most popular civilian in the country. Although his popularity is diminishing now because of the economic difficulties and because of decisiveness and a lot of problems, his popularity is diminishing. But nevertheless, he is still the most popular civilian in Sudan” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

How much power does Hamdok actually have? Observers were split, with some arguing he has power, others that he does not, and still others arguing that he has constitutional authority but has not been decisive in using it. Examining the situation through more of a security lens, Hamdok’s greatest strength is his support from the forces of freedom and change—a protest movement the military clearly doesn’t quite understand. Ongoing divisions within the security forces—particularly the rivalry between Burhan and Hemedti discussed below—also represent an opportunity for Hamdok and the civilian ministers in his government. Finally, Hamdok seems to have the implicit support of many of the rebel groups, particularly Abdel-Aziz Hillu and the SPLM North, based in the Nuba Mountains. One of our interviewees involved with issues in Nuba mentioned that “through some creative diplomacy between David Beasley (director of the World Food Program), which his approach has been bringing these two groups together to just have dialogue without all these external pressures... we started moving toward getting Hamdok to Kauda, which is the rebel opposition stronghold, and he was greeted by over fifty thousand people at the airstrip,

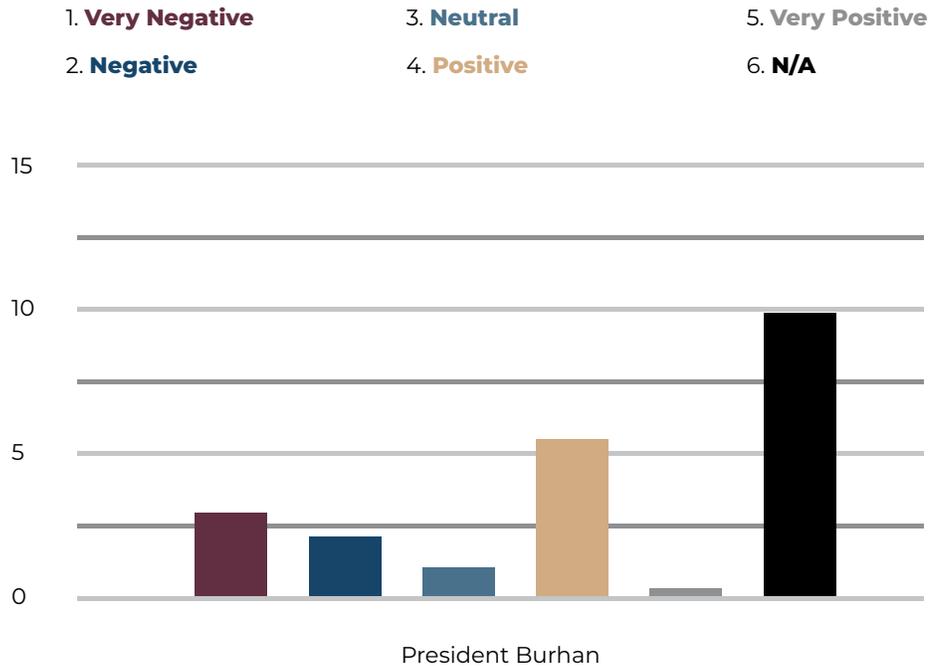
many of whom walked very, very far to get there. So there was this great receiving of that” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). As another interviewee noted: “Hamdok signed an agreement with Commander Abdel Aziz, the head of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, for complete religious freedom for all of the marginalized people. And everybody was celebrating that. And then when he got back to Khartoum, they told him, no way, we’re not going ahead with that” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021).

Explanations for the Sovereignty Counsel’s rejection of Hamdok’s declaration vary, but given the subsequent signing of the Declaration of Principles by President Burhan—which included text very similar to Hamdok’s agreement—one logical explanation is that Burhan was concerned about the possibility of Hamdok gaining the exclusive support of rebel groups. What can be clearly seen from this situation is that Hamdok’s power is certainly limited—and that Burhan is seeking to assert himself as the senior partner between the two. On the other hand, Hamdok’s declaration, and the strong support he received from the Nuba and others, has conceivably limited Burhan’s freedom of action and strengthened the overall position of IRF in Sudan. Thus, while his degree of power is uncertain, the general assessment of Hamdok is probably best summed up by one of the interviewees: “you have (a) prime minister who is pro-religious freedoms, definitely, definitely without any hesitation” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

4.3

President Burhan

Figure 4



The Composite Score of President Burhan is 2.8, indicating an over-all assessment that is neutral to slightly negative.

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan is Chairman of the Sovereign Council, and thus, Sudan’s Head of State. He is widely reported to be an “apolitical military man,” a characterization with which many of our interviewees disagreed. Burhan received his education from the Sudanese Military College, then received further training in Egypt and Jordan. After school, he served as a border guard, military attaché in China, Commander of Sudanese Border Guard Forces, Deputy Chief of Staff of Sudanese Ground Forces Operations, Chief of Staff of Sudanese Ground Forces, and Inspector General of the Army. After the fall of al-Bashir, he was named head of the Transitional Military Council

(precursor to the Sovereignty Council). He has been credited with using his position to implement liberal reforms. Similar to his apolitical nature, Burhan “keeps religious organizations at arm’s length” (Sadiq Shaban, 2019). With that being said, “He was raised in a family that adheres to Khatmiyah Sufi religious teachings. Burhan is, it is believed, “not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood” (Mohammed Amine Yassine, 2019).

Burhan remains an enigmatic figure—and arguably, will be one of the most critical figures to the immediate future of Sudan. As such, both interviewees’ impressions of Burhan and his possible



Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan *Chairman of Sovereign Council*

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan is Chairman of the Sovereign Council, and thus, Sudan's Head of State. He received his education from the Sudanese Military College and received further training in Egypt and Jordan. After school he served as a border guard, military attaché in China, Commander of Sudanese Border Guard Forces, Deputy Chief of Staff of Sudanese Ground Forces Operations, Chief of Staff of Sudanese Ground Forces, and Inspector General of the Army. After the fall of al-Bashir, he was named head of the Transitional Military Council (precursor to the Sovereignty Council, which he also chairs).

future trajectory warrant some further discussion. In general, as the composite score suggests, impressions of him among the interviewees were negative. "Burhan is not a good player at all," one interviewee claimed. "He was involved with the genocide and with what was going on in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. So that's really serious" (Interview conducted on April 1, 2021). Others had a more positive impression. One long-time local activist, when asked for impressions of various different figures, mentioned: "I didn't meet him personally, but the office of President al-Burhan helped a lot" (Interview conducted March 18, 2021). Yet, the most intriguing perspective was presented by one of our local interviewees, who argued that Burhan ultimately intends to seize power: "Burhan is planning for

his own coup d'état. This is why he's heavily dependent on Egyptians. And the Arabians secondly. The Egyptians are trying with Saudi Arabia to convince them (the Emiratis) that Burhan is the right person" (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). According to this interviewee, "at the beginning, his scenario was to get rid of the FFC using the Islamists. And also, he (was) flirting with Islamists to balance out the RSF because the Islamists are powerful... among the officers of the army. So he didn't sack Islamist officers from the army. Also because of the economic crisis, he tried to get immunity. They brutally dispersed the (protesters) on the 30th of June 2019. They killed a lot of youths and so on. He's searching for a kind of immunity" (Ibid). Burhan "believed that if he normalized relations with Israel, he would be in a better position with

the West and he could achieve a kind of immunity. So he... (normalized relations) with the Israelis, crossing a red line for Islamists. But at that time, the Islamists believed that this is tactical, that they should not judge him because they were counting on him” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). However, according to this perspective, Burhan’s external backers had plans that did not include Burhan’s reliance on Islamists: “Later on, he got the support of the Egyptians—direct military presence of Egyptians inside Sudan under the cover of hostility with Ethiopia and so on” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

In assessing the likelihood of a coup, or at least a consolidation of power by Burhan, Egypt’s support will be critical. First, even as Burhan has increasingly gained the support of Egypt, the Emiratis are still supportive of Hemedti and the RSF. Consequently, there are some low-level tensions within the Arab troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. If Burhan, Hemedti, and the Islamists represent three poles within the security forces, then Burhan must engage in a careful balancing act between the Islamists and the RSF to maintain his position, let alone consolidate. Egypt’s support could prove vital in this task. All of this also comes against the backdrop of an ongoing investigation of the massacre of protesters outside the military headquarters in June 2019. It is generally understood that the RSF were responsible, though the RSF claim that “Islamist infiltrators” falsely wearing RSF uniforms are responsible (Mat Nashed, 2021). For Burhan, the final report—when it comes out—will represent an opportunity to sideline either the RSF or the Islamists, but he must move carefully so as not to become dependent on the other faction. Thus, if

Burhan is to ultimately take power, he will need not only the unified backing of both Egypt and the Emirates, but also some base of support within the country. Additionally, as one of our interviewees mentioned, “the Egyptians... don’t want Islamists as the main partner. So they encourage Burhan to get rid of some of the Islamists and to achieve peace with (Abdel-Aziz) Hilu (of the SPLM north)” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

Again, this brings the discussion back to the Declaration of Principles. An interviewee from Nuba described the process leading up to the declaration as follows: “Finally, there became an opportunity for David Beasley to then be a mediator between Burhan and Abdel-Aziz... and they recently signed this... declaration of principles” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). The major provisions of the Declaration are:

1. Recognition of the racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of Sudan
2. Emphasizing the need for federalism and local autonomy
3. The formal separation of religion and State
4. The incorporation of the SPLM-N armed forces into the armed forces of the Republic of Sudan
5. A promise to consider all provisions in the drafting of the constitution at the end of the transitional period
6. A permanent ceasefire

Judging from the analysis of an interviewee based in Khartoum, the

Declaration of Principles alienated Burhan from his former Islamist allies. “Burhan crossed another line for the Islamists, which is the separation of religion and state. Of course, there are very few pragmatic Islamists (who) believed that Burhan is right... Separation of state and religion is the main baggage of the Islamist group. Burhan crossed another line and... now he is a little bit isolated from the mainstream of Islamists, which is good because the potential social base of any dictatorship in Sudan is Islamist. Burhan is losing them (so) his possibility of being a military dictator will diminish” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Yet, some advocates had concerns about the Declaration of Principles. “I was hoping

the only document they were going to sign is an agreement of separation of religion and state. Burhan came with the whole declaration of principles, just laid out other issues in the peace negotiations. The religious freedom and the separation of religion and state, to me, affects the entire country and everyone in the country where the peace agreement and the other declaration of principles mainly talk about the geographic and issues of the Nuba and Blue Nile people. So my problem is that since that is all in one agreement, whatever happens in the future, if something doesn't go right with the other aspects of a peace negotiation, this declaration of principles may be

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES



REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
SOUTH SUDAN MEDIATION COMMITTEE
FOR THE SUDANESE PEACE TALKS
OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN



**Declaration of Principles between the
Transitional Government of Sudan and the
Sudan People's Liberation Movement –
North**

28th March of the year 2021.

Juba, Republic of South Sudan





Declaration of Principles between the Transitional Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North

We, the delegations of the transitional Government of the Sudan, hereinafter referred to as (Government of Sudan), and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North, hereinafter referred to as (the SPLM - N);

Taking in to account all the previous talks that took place between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM - N;

And in mind the sense of the long and continuous suffering of the citizens in war zones, and the damages that the war causes on all Sudanese;

Believing that the glorious December revolution, that the young women and men of Sudan and the revolutions of the armed struggle movements that imbued with enormous blood and sacrifices, and which have created, a historic opportunity to address the root causes of the Sudanese crisis and build a citizenship state that accommodates all.

Emphasizing the importance of reaching a comprehensive, negotiated peace agreement that puts a logical end to the war in Sudan;

The two parties agree that the following principles form the basis for resolving the conflict in Sudan:

1. The two parties agree to work together to achieve and consolidate the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Sudan.
- 2 / Any comprehensive solution to the Sudanese problem requires all parties to recognize and affirm the following:
 - (A) The history and nature of the conflict in the Sudan confirm that a military solution cannot lead to lasting peace and stability in the country;
 - (B) A peaceful and just political solution to the conflict in the Sudan must be a common goal of the parties to the negotiation;
- 2-1: Sudan is racially, ethnically, religiously and culturally a diverse state; therefore, this diversity must be fully recognized and managed, and the question of national identity be addressed.
- 2-2: Emphasize the right of the peoples of the regions of Sudan to manage their affairs through decentralization or federalism.
- 2-3: The establishment of a civil, democratic, federal State in Sudan, wherein, the freedom of religion, the freedom of belief and religious practices and worship shall be guaranteed to all Sudanese people by separating the identities of culture, region, ethnicity and religion from the State. No religion shall be imposed on anyone and the State shall not adopt any official religion. The State shall be impartial in terms of religious





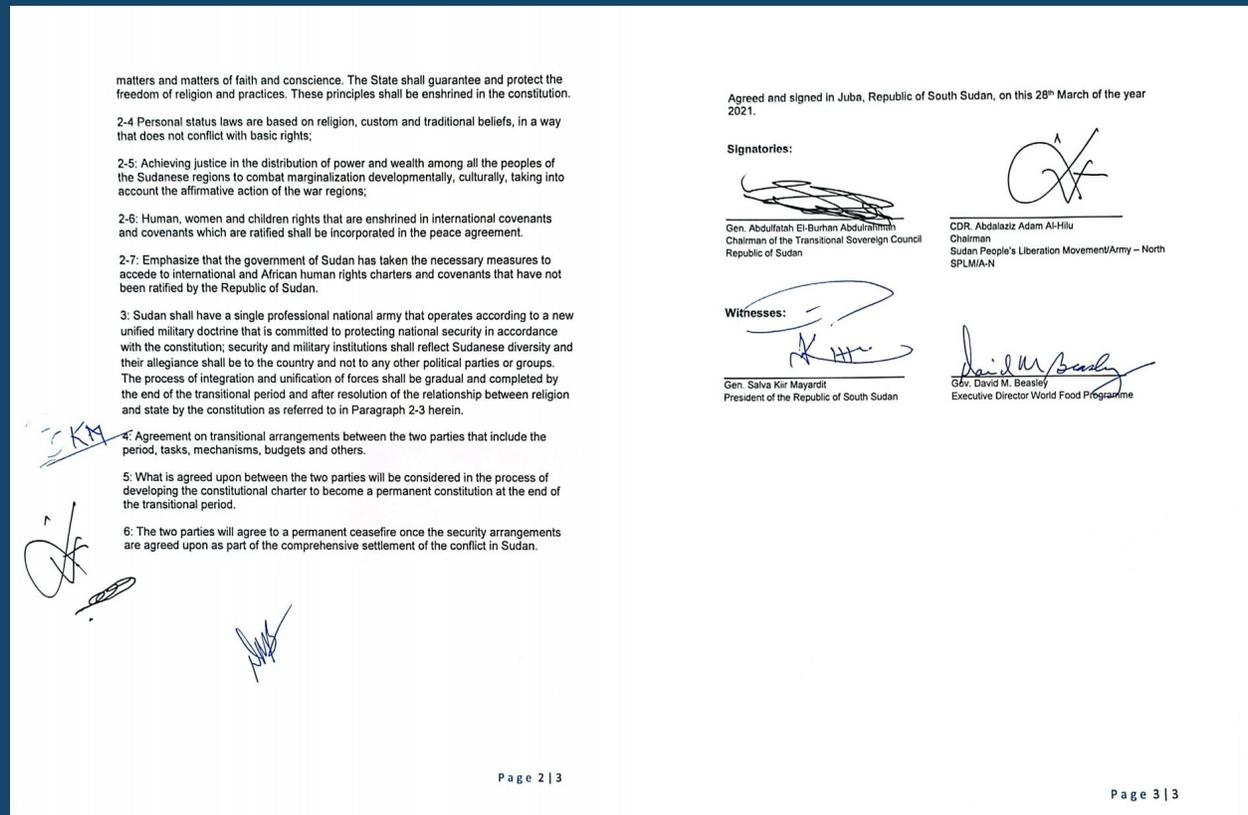

Page 1 | 3

thrown out. Separation of religion and state that's tied to the declaration of principles may not be respected. So that's something I'm a bit worried about myself" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021).

Yet, if it is implemented, the IRF implications are potentially huge. It is important to note that the provision separating church and state has the strongest language of any provision included in the document. It reads, "The two parties agree that the following principles form the basis for resolving the conflict in Sudan: The establishment of a civil, democratic, federal State in Sudan, wherein, the freedom of religion, the

freedom of belief and religious practices and worship shall be guaranteed to all Sudanese people by separating the identities of culture, region, ethnicity and religion from the State. No religion shall be imposed on anyone and the State shall not adopt any official religion. The State shall be impartial in terms of religious matters and matters of faith and conscience. The State shall guarantee and protect the freedom of religion and practices. These principles shall be enshrined in the constitution" (Sudan News Agency, 2021). Importantly, this is the only provision that is immediately followed by the words, «these principles shall be enshrined in the constitution,» indicating the government's commitment to them.

REPUBLIC OF SUDAN



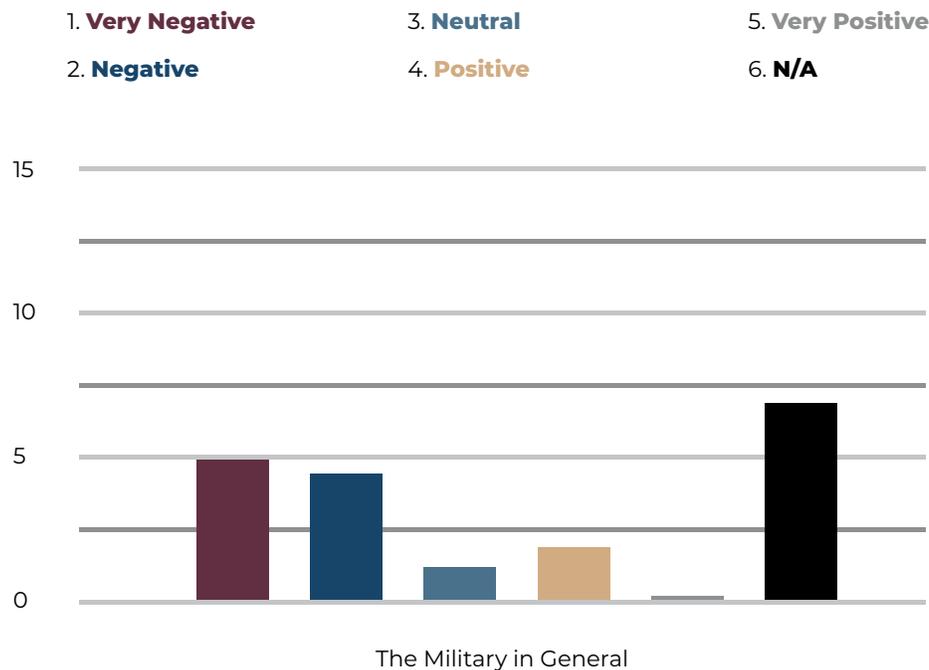
Because it is not yet constitutional law, enforcement and implementation do seem to be dependent upon goodwill and personal compliance at this time. With that being said, the government's willingness to publicly bind itself to constitutional enshrinement of religious freedom is a positive step.

The Declaration, of course, also benefits Burhan. By removing the threat of renewed war with the SPLM, he could, in theory, focus on wresting control of

the security forces away from the RSF and Islamists alike. At the same time, implementing the provision about integrating rebels into the military would blunt the power of both the RSF and Islamists in the security apparatus, thus stabilizing Burhan's position. If consolidation of power is his goal, it seems the precedent he is most likely to follow is that of Numeiri during the early years of his rule. Ultimately, however, Burhan's fate depends on that of the next actor to be discussed: Sudan's military as a whole.

4.4 The Military

Figure 5



The composite score of the military is 2.0, one of the lowest composite scores of any actor, and indicative of a negative overall impression.

The Sudanese military and security sector was, particularly after the removal of Turabi, the most important bastion of support for Bashir. As such, aside from the Islamists themselves, the security forces are viewed by our interviewees as one of the biggest obstacles to religious freedom in Sudan. There was also a general sense that the military was unwilling to subordinate itself to the civilian government: “what was supposed to happen was that from what the protesters and the activist community wanted, they wanted a technocratic government to put the country in a pathway to an inclusive government that would then lead to a democratic election. But what really took place was a power struggle between this technocratic government with the army. So it was never the purpose of the current civilian government to be in a power struggle with the military. They were supposed to act on their own in a pathway toward peace and democracy. So there’s been a lot of maneuvering between the [military] and the civilian government” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). A former U.S. government actor was even more direct. “You know, this “civilian government” still has a very strong military component. And, you know, there’s a big question of does this civilian government have any influence over military budget... And I doubt they do. And the way things

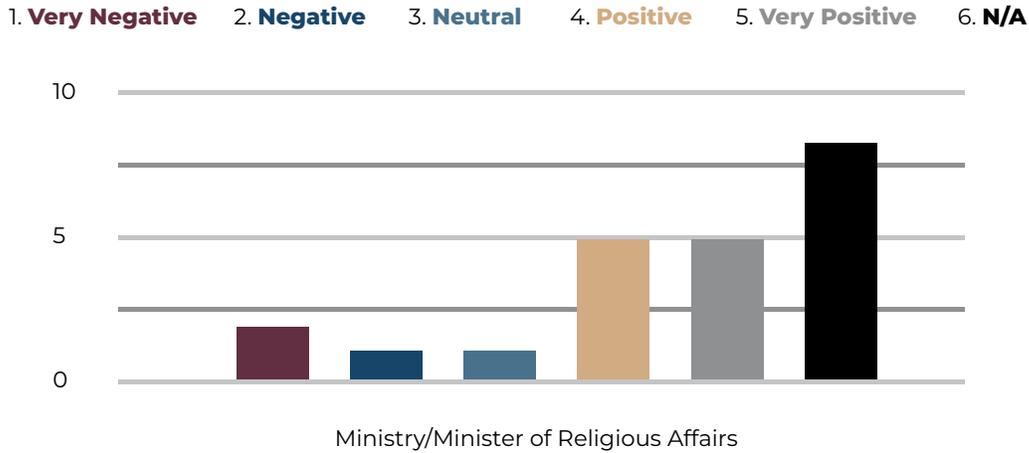
are trending in Ethiopia with the dam and the fight with Eritrea and all these spillover conflicts, I think we’ll see in the next six months who’s really calling the shots in Khartoum” (Interview conducted March 10, 2021). Activists generally agreed that the military, and its potential control, was one of the most serious potential impediments to progress in Sudan (Interview conducted February 17, 2021). This assessment seemed to be shared by many within Nuba, Darfur and Blue Nile as well: “But the Nuba and the Darfurians were saying, you know, there is more to it than that. We need to make sure that the military doesn’t get control of Sudan. The Muslim Brotherhood has control of the military and the Islamists have control of the military” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021).

A historical examination of Sudan since independence would tend to indicate 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. Recommendations in this regard will be discussed later in this study.

4.5

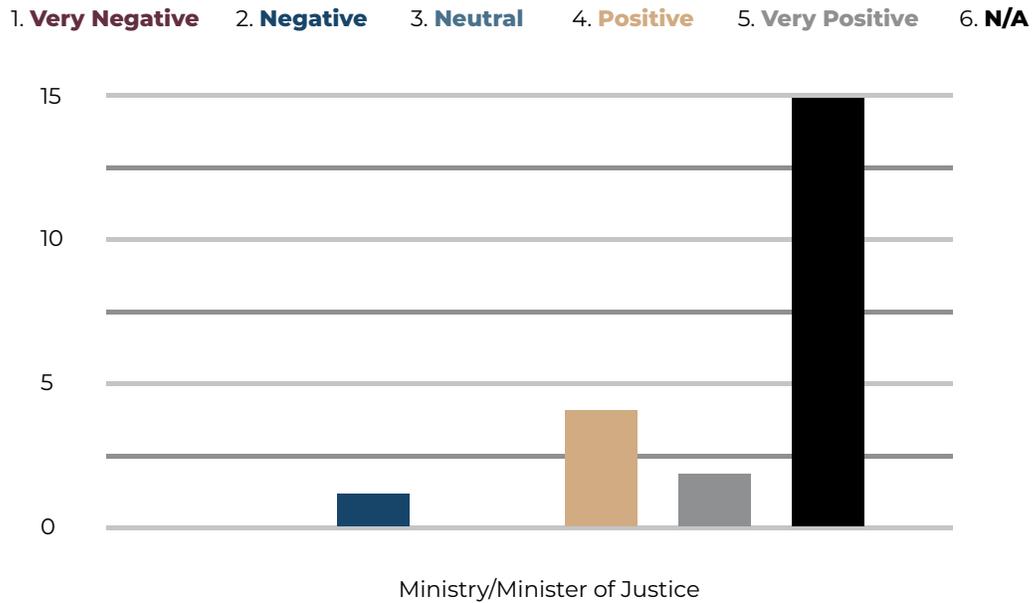
Civilian Ministries: Justice, Religious Affairs, and Education

Figure 6



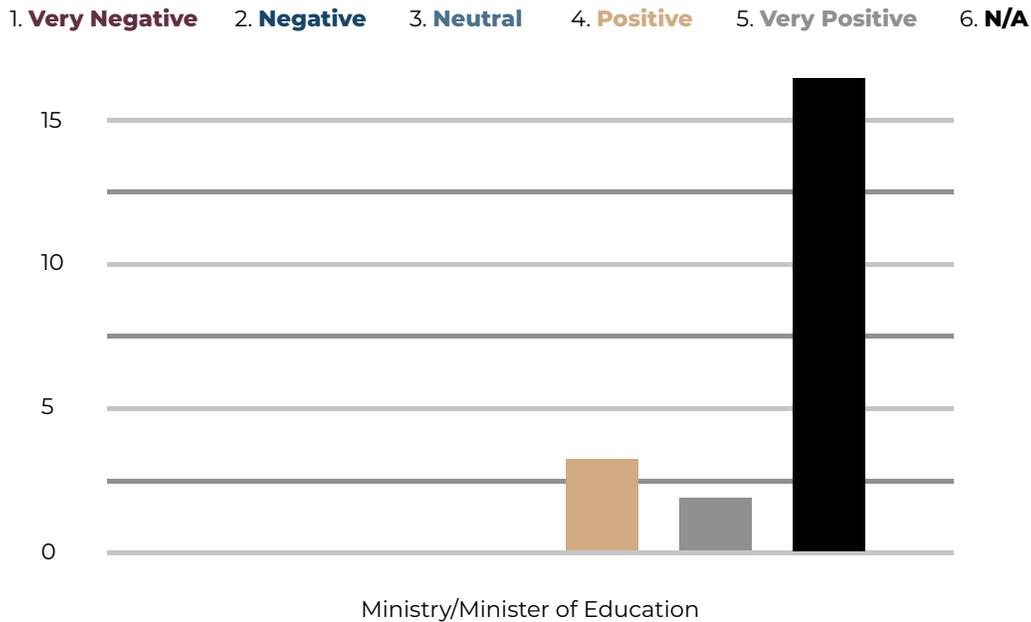
The composite score of the Ministry/Minister of Religious Affairs is 3.7, meaning the overall impression was neutral to positive. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 36.4%, meaning a majority of interviewees mentioned this minister.

Figure 7



The composite score of the Ministry/Minister of Justice is 4.0, meaning the overall impression was very positive. However, the percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 68.2%, meaning a majority of interviewees did not discuss this minister.

Figure 8



The composite score of the Ministry/Minister of Education is 4.4, meaning the overall impression was positive to very positive. However, the percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 77.3%, meaning that very few interviewees mentioned this minister.

In general, the civilian cabinet was viewed positively by most of our interviewees. This is particularly true of the Minister of Religious Affairs, Nasreddine Mufreh, a young human rights lawyer who emerged from the Forces of Freedom and Change. “The guy in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is very good. And he’s just wanting to ensure everyone’s freedom and respecting each other. And as a result, I do believe you’d have to ask others and maybe you have. But churches for the first time have been able to acquire deeds for land, which was something that was used to destroy and bulldoze churches in the past. So there have been some significant changes as a result” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Mufreh’s retention in this role was seen as a positive by interviewees: “we’re happy to hear that the minister of religious affairs is reinstated even in

the new government. They formed the new government two weeks ago and the minister of religious affairs is kept. Hamdok insisted that he has to be there because he made the progress. So I’m happy with that” (Interview conducted March 8, 2021). It is anticipated that the Ministry of Religious Affairs will play a substantial role in implementing the separation of church and state principles in the constitution. “The way I’ve heard it said is the Ministry of Religious Affairs will make sure that everyone’s freedoms are respected” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021).

One interviewee had a more negative view of the religious affairs ministry. “Sometimes people in the international community, especially in Europe, look at all of this as a progressive era. But within the community right now, there is

a lot of unheard news that's happening in Sudan and nobody knows about it. Like two months ago, the Sudanese Council of Churches issued a letter and announced that they no longer recognize the minister of religious affairs in Sudan. This is not something small. He tried to control the funds that come to the church. And he wants to control the elections within the church. He wants to control the premises of the church and it's the same for mosques. And this is not freedom... there was a conflict within the Presbyterian church, Two groups that got divided into two churches. And they had a 50 year anniversary festival. The minister of religious affairs went. He went to one group and saluted them, and excluded the other one... It's the

same thing with the evangelical church, it's the same thing with the Catholic Church. And the Catholic Church actually is suffering the most, and the evangelical church especially is suffering. And during the al-Bashir time, they wouldn't dare talk about the funds that went to the churches or to mosques. But these guys, they're trying to control the money, the funds" (Interview conducted March 18, 2021).

However, another interviewee, also a Muslim of local national origin, had a very different perspective: "Look, in the Sudan Council of Churches leadership, there are still Bashir supporters. The current secretary general of the Sudan Council of Churches, he is basically a supporter

“ *But churches for the first time have been able to acquire deeds for land, which was something that was used to destroy and bulldoze churches in the past. So there have been some significant changes as a result*





Nasreddine Mufreh

Minister of Religious Affairs

Minister Mufreh previously worked as a human rights lawyer and was involved in the protest movement. He was appointed Minister of Religious Affairs on September 2019, 8. Since taking office he has acknowledged Sudan's Christian and Jewish minorities, and even encouraged Jewish residents who fled the country to return. He also appointed a commission to investigate attacks on Khartoum's Sudanese Church of Christ.

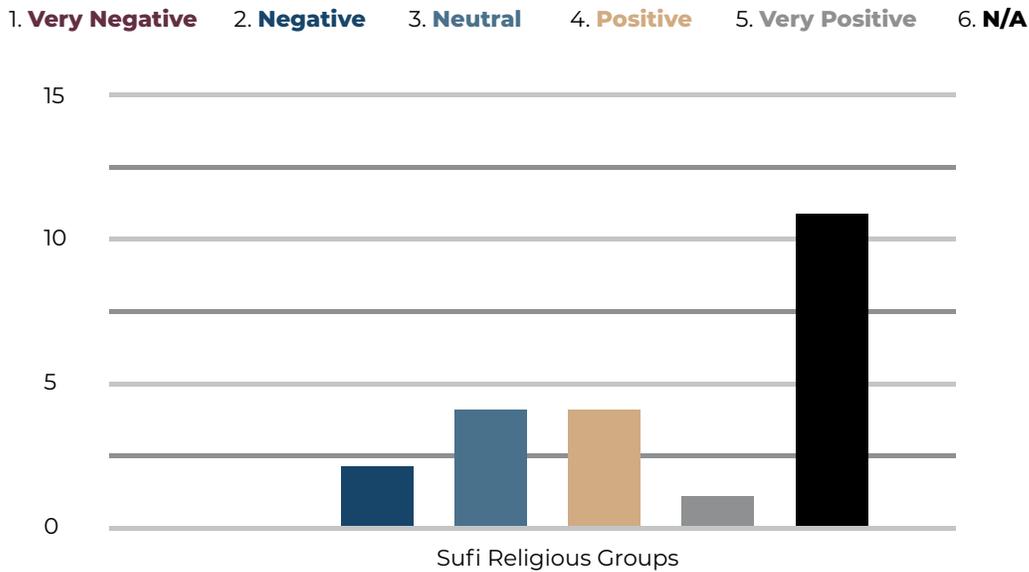
of Bashir. So that's why when I met with him and I asked him to bring his board and his twelve denominations, and he was alone. I always wanted to meet with the grassroots people. So I asked the minister of religious affairs, I want to meet with the grass root people and people I connected with during the conference and all of that. And he said, because the Council of Churches is not coming along, we created our own trap of engaging Christian pastors and leaders" (Interview conducted March 8, 2021). Aside from one interviewee, however, impressions of Mufreh were almost universally positive. The same can be said of the Minister of Education. "Actually, the minister of education, the first one they chose was actually from this group (the Republican Brotherhood), and he has done a lot of incredible work. To make the syllabus for the schools and so on, elementary,

intermediate and high school and so on" (Interview conducted April 5, 2021). Other interviewees described national curriculum reform in positive terms. "There is very good movement in creating a national curriculum, I would say there is improvements that could be better, but they're trying to make the education system more inclusive and look at ways in which it has oppressed other groups of people in the country" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Though the justice minister received fewer direct comments, views on him were also quite positive. "The justice minister I've only heard positive things about. And also because he has an NGO background, he was in the civil society and then he joined the government" (Interview conducted on April 1, 2021). Overall, then, these three civilian ministers were viewed quite positively.

4.6

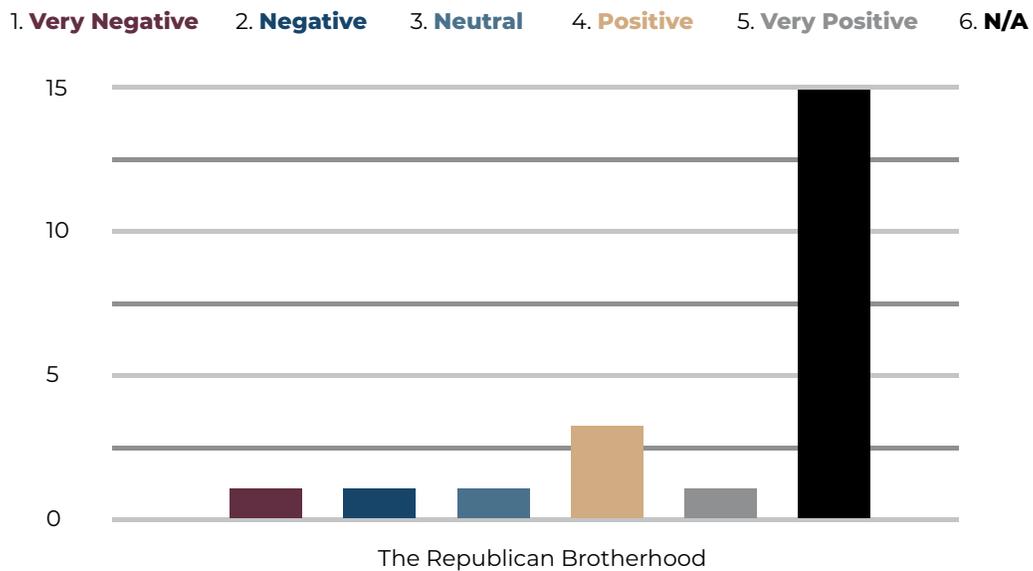
Sudanese Religious Groups

Figure 9



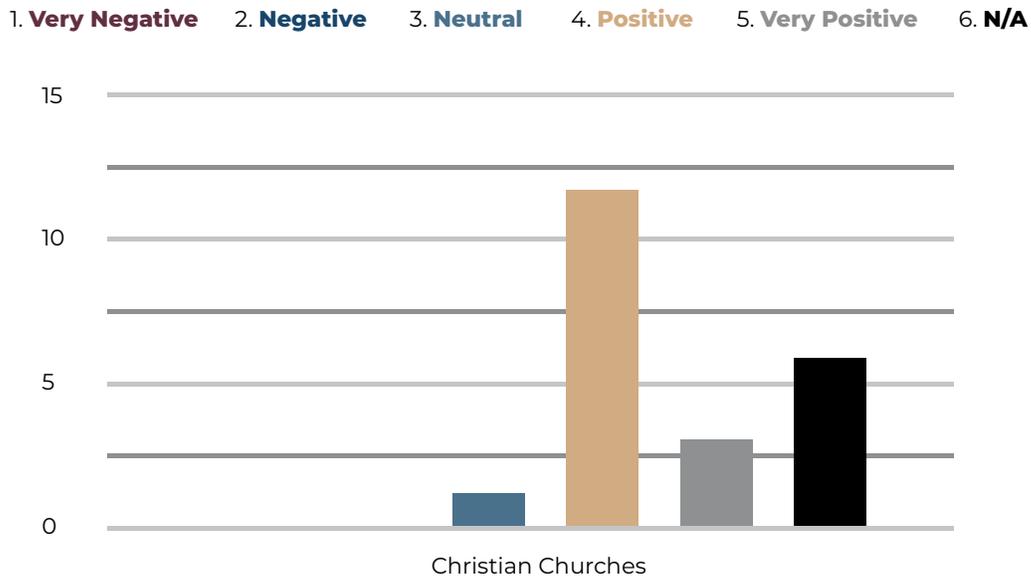
The composite score of Sufi religious groups is 3.4, meaning the overall impression was neutral to slightly positive. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 50%, meaning that only about half of interviewees discussed Sufis or Sufism.

Figure 10



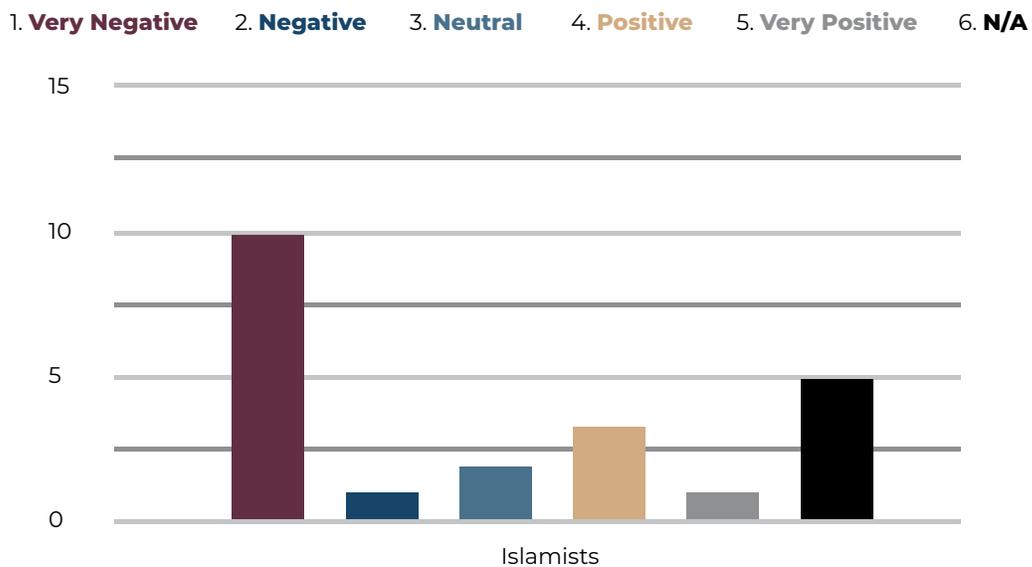
The composite score of the Republican Brotherhood is 3.7, meaning that overall impressions were neutral to positive. However, the percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 72.7%, meaning that very few interviewees discussed the Republican Brotherhood.

Figure 11



The composite score of Christian churches is 4.1, meaning that overall impressions were positive. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 27.3%, meaning a majority of interviewees discussed Christian churches.

Figure 12



The composite score of Islamists is 2.1, one of the lowest scores recorded in our analysis, meaning that the overall impression was negative. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 22.7%, meaning that a majority of interviewees discussed Islamists.

“ *Christians within Sudan were seen by many interviewees as a vital part of the protest movement. “What they did is that they took the gospel to the people that were moving on the street demonstrating. People were out on the streets for days and months. And so the Christian leaders, whether pastors or church leaders or just community from the church, went out and provided the gospel, worship, food, clothing, and shelter. They went and they were part and parcel of the movement”*

Interview with observer conducted on March 8, 2021.

On the whole, Christians and Islamists represented the poles among interviewees in terms of their level of helpfulness in promoting religious freedom, with Sufi groups and the Republican Brotherhood seen as positive, but discussed by a smaller sub-set of the group. To some degree, this indicates a general lack of familiarity among our interviewees with the internal dynamics of religion in Sudan: for both the Republican Brotherhood and the Sufis, local nationals were far more likely to discuss their impact than IRF professionals from outside the country.

Christians within Sudan were seen by many interviewees as a vital part of the protest movement. “What they did is that they took the gospel to the people that were moving on the street demonstrating. People were out on the streets for days and months. And so the Christian leaders, whether pastors or church leaders or just community from the church, went out and provided the gospel, worship, food, clothing, and shelter. They went and they were part and parcel of the movement” (Interview with observer conducted on March 8, 2021). Others noted the participation of Christians, as well as ethnic minorities, as indications that the 2019 protests were likely to succeed (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Unsurprisingly, our international interviewees, as well as local nationals within the Christian community, had the most positive perspectives. Interestingly, our Sudanese local national interviewees were also positive, but they were willing and able to point out some of the internal dynamics and tensions within the Christian community. Here, we found a split among those who worked on IRF issues directly, as discussed above in the section on the Minister of Religious Affairs.

By contrast, it was the local Sudanese—both Christian and Muslim—who were the most positive about the Republican Brotherhood. An interviewee of Sudanese extraction who was a convert to Christianity mentioned the Republican Brotherhood as having “done a lot of good work bringing more tolerance and freedom... incredible work, but of course they were really oppressed, suppressed. They were not allowed to exist. They have started now again to operate freely. And I think they are for freedom of choice” (Interview conducted on April 5, 2021). A Sudanese Muslim interviewee described them as “another modern democratic interpretation of Islam, a

little bit dogmatic, but generally humane and democratic” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Still, he expressed some concerns that their beliefs may alienate them from the Muslim mainstream in Sudan: “Unfortunately Mahmoud (Taha) didn’t confine himself to a social, political, and moral reform. He also touched worship rituals, salah the praying, the way you pray. There is a grain of this in Sufism, but it is a very isolated idea. This is why to some extent, they are isolated in the market, not in the mainstream. And I’m afraid that by this problem, they don’t have the ability to be mainstream in the foreseeable future” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Part of the challenge faced by the Republican Brotherhood is their separation from broader Sufi currents within Sudan. Stephen Howard, a long-time scholar-observer of the Republican Brotherhood, explains the distinction: “The Republicans felt that Sufism had too much of an investment in ritual and adherence to personal relationships with a shaykh. Republicans often referred to these practices as “dhikir bidun fikr” or ‘remembering God without thinking.’ Of course, most Republican brothers and sisters came from families that had practiced Sufism for generations, and Republican ritual itself was marked by Sufi-inspired characteristics, such as collective chanting of the name of God, or singing odes (qasaid) in praise of Prophet or God. But Republicans rejected adherence to taifia-sectarianism—which they felt had both deteriorated Sufi devotion and politicized Sufi organizations in Sudan” (Howard, 2021). The Republican Brotherhood, then, is a positive, all be it potentially marginal, actor in the Sudanese religious landscape.

Unlike the Republican Brotherhood, Sufism is not only within the mainstream

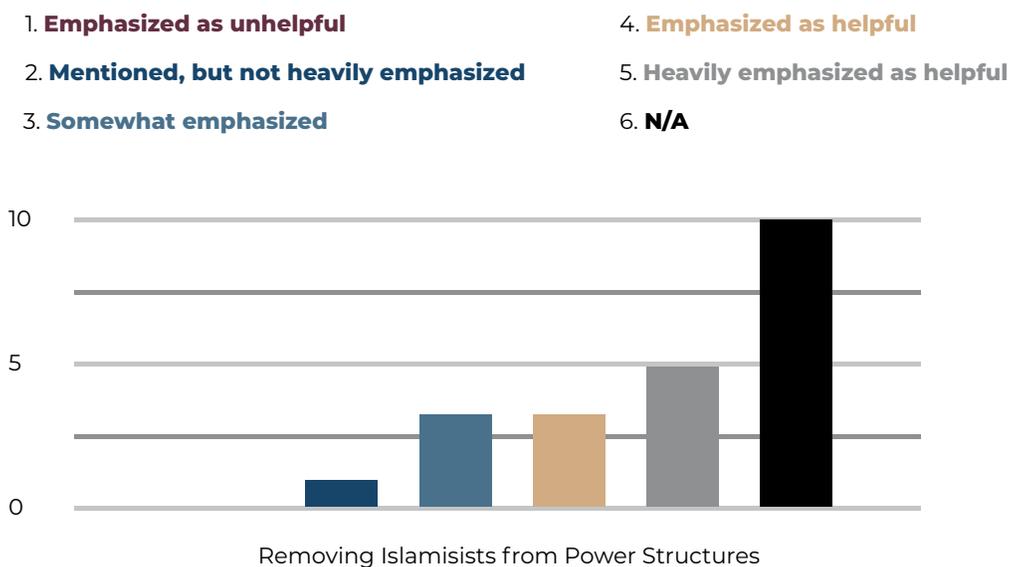
of Sudanese Islam, it arguably is the mainstream. Thus, of all the religious groups we assessed, the Sufis may be the most pivotal in assessing the future of religious freedom. Overall, the perception of Sufis was neutral to slightly positive. One local Sudanese interviewee was particularly positive: “...so I met with a major Sufi order leader, and he’s currently also serving the president of the Sufi coalition or council... I went to his mosque and I met with him and he said to me, you know, we in Sudan, we have no problem in terms of our relationship with the Christian communities in the country. We have no problem. But the problem is some of the policies of the government, which has helped to deteriorate the relationship between the society. And so he’s definitely open. And the same is true of other Sufi orders as well in terms of giving religious freedom for everyone” (Interview conducted on March 8, 2021). For many of the Christian interviewees from outside of Sudan, familiarity with the internal dynamics of Islam in Sudan was somewhat low. However, some interviewees felt an increasing appreciation for what they described as “moderate Muslims” over time. For example, one long-time activist on Sudan issues noted: “for me having gone through 9/11 and seeing so much persecution of Christians by Muslims over the years, it was a real eye opener to me that there is such a thing as moderate Muslims, but they’re not the people who, you know, some people in the foreign policy elites are telling you. It’s people like the Muslims in the Nuba Mountains and the Darfurians and people like that. Those are really moderate Muslims. Those are people who Islam is their religion, but they don’t want to impose it on the rest of the world. They don’t want to take over the world... So my attitude was really

opened up in that respect and I saw that these people are being hammered by Khartoum too and we need to continue to help them” (Interview conducted February 17, 2021). That said, some interviewees thought there might be a hang-up for the Muslim community in general around the idea of secularism. One interviewee mentioned that “this idea of secularism is not really accepted a lot in the north. And people just see this word of secularism as being anti-God, not respecting each other’s thoughts and beliefs” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Secularism might indeed be a loaded word for Sufi groups, because of its past associations with Communism and the extreme laicity of Ataturk that particularly targeted Turkey’s Sufi orders. This does not mean that religious freedom itself is a deal-breaker for Sufis, but it does indicate that the argument

for it must be made in a careful and nuanced fashion, ideally in a way that builds on Muslim tradition.

If there is some ambivalence or uncertainty about the Sufis, there is very little of either where Islamists are concerned. Interviewees were all but unanimous in their belief that Islamists remain one of the most serious threats to religious freedom in Sudan. When asked to identify reasons for future concern, one interviewee emphasized: “another issue is that the Islamists don’t take back the power or that there’s another coup or something like that” (Interview conducted April 1, 2021). In general, even though the Islamists are out of power, interviewees saw them as still a pervasive threat, as the following figure demonstrates.

Figure 13



When asked to assess best practices or necessary conditions for IRF in Sudan—most of which will be discussed below—the composite score of removing Islamists from power structures is 4.0, meaning that interviewees were positive regarding its helpfulness. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 45.5%, meaning that just over half of interviewees viewed this as important.

As one interviewee put it: “even if they are no longer in power, their base remains quietly. It’s kind of like they hibernate and they continue working. Even if they work through humanitarian support, they will do that to just keep their system alive. And once they have identified a weak entry point, they take a bus ride back up again, and they are right in the position... they have short-term and long-term programs and approaches. And so for a season, they might not be there. But then they’ll always find ways to identify weak points and they always look towards creating weaknesses in the system wherever they are” (Interview with IRF observer conducted March 8, 2021). Others cautioned that Islamists, through the security services, still retain hidden networks within many of Sudan’s institutions: “you have the military security apparatus, which is still infiltrated by Islamists and still in police, in army, and security intelligence... . You will find a lot of Islamist security sources in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. You will find security sources among churches. You will find security sources everywhere, and they sabotage the (liberalization) policies” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Interviewees also generally agreed that

the popular perception of Islamists is very negative: “In the eyes of the Sudanese people, being an Islamist is directly related to being a thief” (Interview conducted April 10, 2021). Others emphasized that removing Islamists was more central to the revolutionaries than economic issues: “They were shouting hunger and not the Muslim Brothers, meaning they are ready to take hunger, but they don’t want the Muslim Brothers to come back again into power” (Interview conducted April 5, 2021). It is unclear how much power Islamists actually have, but a return to direct Islamist rule seems unlikely: not only due to popular disapproval, but also due to the unwillingness of the external Arab trioka to support such a government. The most realistic concern, then, is that political leaders will engage in tactical compromises with Islamists that might potentially undermine religious freedom in the short or long-term.

To conclude, most interviewees’ general assessment fell in the range of cautious optimism. Interviewees were also asked about IRF issues of concern for the present and future of Sudan; the results of this question are shown in the figure below.

Figure 14

Which of the following aspects or elements of religious freedom restrictions or persecution did the interviewee mention as current or future concerns in Sudan? (Please select all that apply). 22 responses.

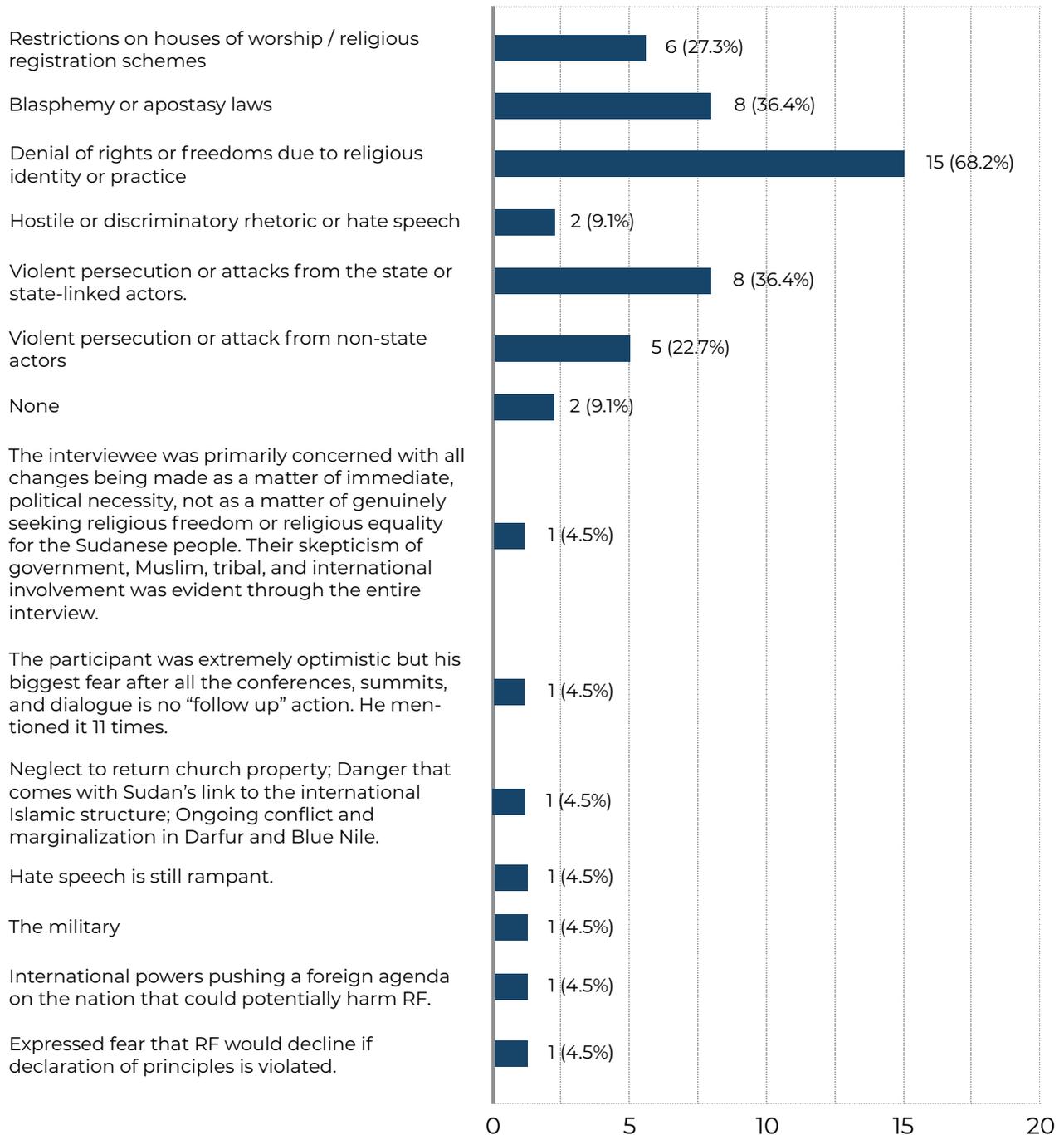
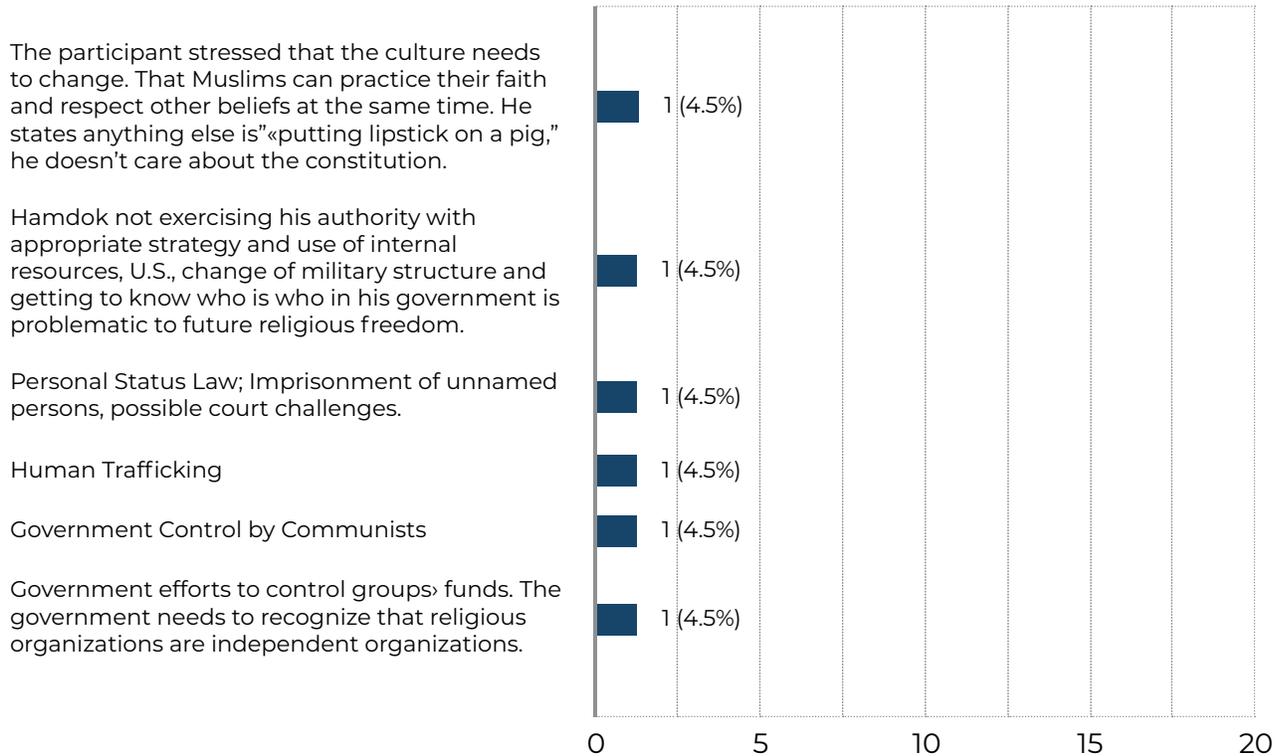


Figure 14 Continued

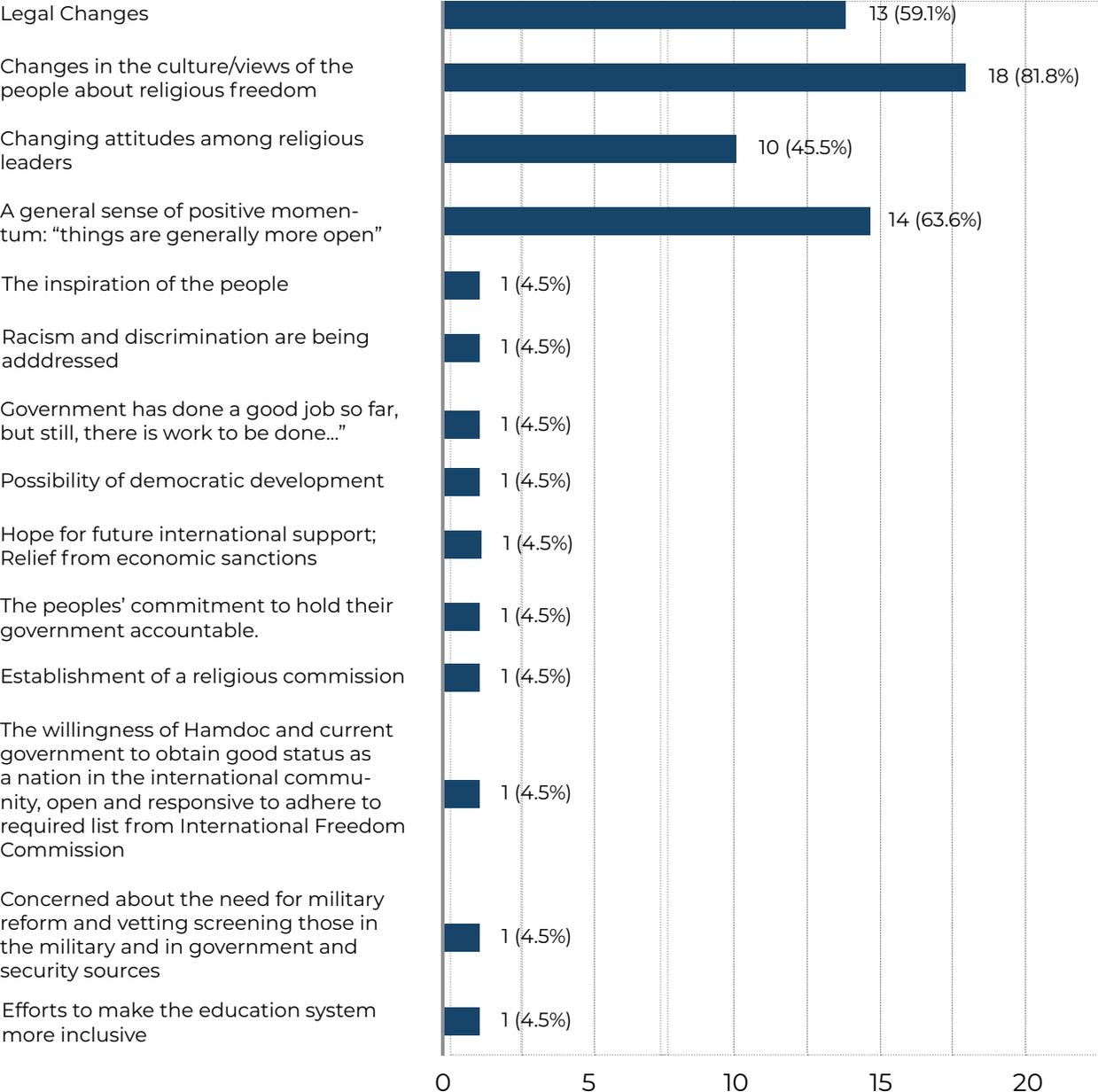
Which of the following aspects or elements of religious freedom restrictions or persecution did the interviewee mention as current or future concerns in Sudan? (Please select all that apply). 22 responses.



Out of those interviewed, 27.3% mentioned restrictions on houses of worship, 36.4% mentioned blasphemy or apostasy laws, 68.2% mentioned denial of rights or freedoms due to religious identity or practice, 9.1% mentioned hostile rhetoric or hate speech, 36.4% mentioned violent persecution by the state, and 22.7% mentioned violent persecution from non-state actors. All other factors were each mentioned by 4.5% of the interviewees. Interviewees were also asked about reasons they had to be optimistic regarding the future trajectory of religious freedom in Sudan; the results of that question are shown in the figure below.

Figure 15

Which of the following were identified by the interviewee as current or future reasons for optimism? (Please select all that apply). 22 responses.



Of those interviewed, 59.1% mentioned legal changes, 81.8% mentioned changes in culture, 45.5% mentioned changing attitudes among religious leaders, and 63.6% mentioned a general sense of positive momentum. All other factors were each mentioned by 4.5% of the interviewees.

For Sudan, then, the task ahead is to consolidate and expand on the positive progress made, developing applicable best practices for Sudan and the broader IRF landscape. It is to this question that the case study will now turn.

Part III.

Best Practices and the Road Ahead

Based on the assessment of our interviewees and a review of the secondary literature, several best practices emerge both for promotion of IRF in Sudan and, more broadly, for IRF promotion in the MENA region. While Sudan's progress has been substantial, considerable work still remains to be done, and interviewees had a number of detailed and helpful suggestions in this regard. There are also a number of key lessons that can be learned from the Sudanese case and applied to the broader IRF mission.

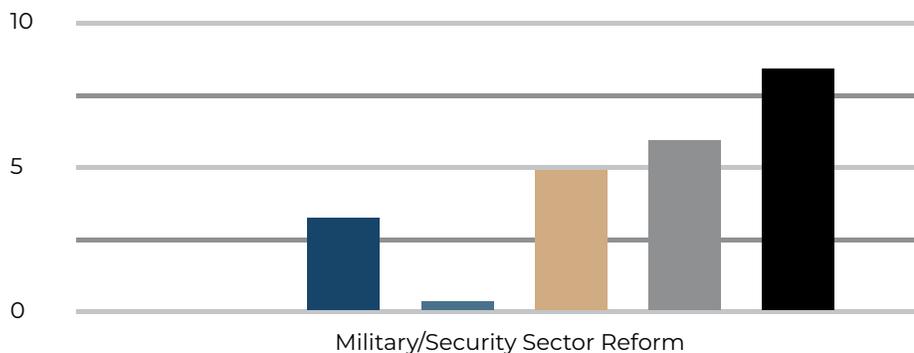
Interviewees were asked to identify keys to the successful institutionalization of IRF in Sudan. Based on an initial review, several factors emerged as repeated points of discussion: training and education in a local context; security sector reform; legal changes; cultural changes; and, as discussed above, removing Islamists from power structures.

5.1

Security Sector Reform

Figure 16

1. **Emphasized as unhelpful** 2. **Mentioned, but not heavily emphasized** 3. **Somewhat emphasized**
 4. **Emphasized as helpful** 5. **Heavily emphasized as helpful** 6. **N/A**



The composite score of military/security sector reform is 4.0, meaning that interviewees were positive about its helpfulness. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 36.4%, meaning that just under two-thirds of interviewees thought it was important.

Far and away the greatest threat to continued IRF progress is the outsized role security forces still play in Sudan's politics. The Sudanese military remains the last real bastion of Islamist support within the government, and the paramilitary rapid security forces also retain substantial influence over the near-term and long-term future of the country. As one interviewee explained: "Unless you reform the military security sector, everything is reversible, everything is reversible" (Interview conducted on April 10, 2021). Others agreed: "What the world community should be doing, what the US should be doing, what all of us who care about international religious freedom should be doing is continuing to push and to say that the military rule needs to end and we need to keep pushing for religious freedom" (Interview conducted February 17, 2021). Others emphasized the point that Islamism remains pervasive in the military: "The military has been controlled by them... the whole army is controlled by people with the same ideology, because they didn't allow anybody (else) to be part of it" (Interview conducted April 5, 2021). One interviewee had a particularly ambitious and detailed proposal for security sector reform: "The top priority is military security reform, and we have to convince Hamdok to put this as a top priority. First, establish interior security, which is a brand new organ. This is legal. This is constitutional. We should have a branch of security focused on interior issues. And this should be under the authority of the prime minister, not the Sovereignty Council, not the military. Hamdok should establish this organ to put people who are committed to democracy, who are committed to human rights in this organ. And you

should have within this organ a counter-terrorism branch. You have thousands of new graduates, of university graduates unemployed. If you get one thousand of these people and you train them with CIA or any western agency, after two years, you will have real security. Also there must be a long term commitment from the British, the Americans, and the Germans. Regarding the police, you have to sack any partisan, especially the Islamists among the police out. Of course, regarding the military, if we just managed to incorporate groups like the Nuba Mountains Army, Blue Nile Army, we will dilute the Islamists in the army and you will secure Sudan fifty years in the future from an Islamist coup d'état, because the vast majority of Nuba Mountains, the Blue Nile and even among the RSF, the vast majority are not Islamists. So if you merge all these rebel movements, if you marry all the rebel movements in the army, you will change the composition of the army itself. It is possible, but we need the West's pressure and support and training and so on" (Interview conducted April 10, 2021).

Here again, the support of outside actors for elements within the security forces—and Arab troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular—is an often overlooked but ultimately pivotal dynamic. While substantial reforms that limit the military's influence over the civilian government—such as many of those discussed above—would be ideal in the long-term, this could actually exacerbate tensions between the military and civilians, ultimately pushing the military to close ranks—even if that includes protecting bad actors. Thus, in the short-term, practical, narrowly focused reforms designed

to increase support for IRF within the military could be enormously beneficial. As one of our interviewees mentioned, and as the Declaration of Principles also clearly stated, integration of the rebel forces and as much of the RSF as can be integrated commensurate with the needs for justice and reform, would weaken the Islamists substantially. This integration must be more than mere window-dressing: SPLM leaders and members of other rebel groups should be integrated throughout.

IRF advocates should pressure 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.



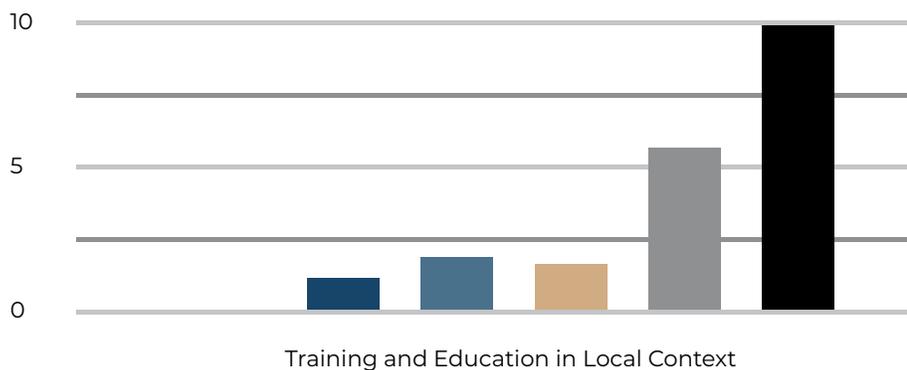
“ *Far and away the greatest threat to continued IRF progress is the outsized role security forces still play in Sudan’s politics. The Sudanese military remains the last real bastion of Islamist support within the government, and the paramilitary rapid security forces also retain substantial influence over the near-term and long-term future of the country.*

5.2

Training and Education in Local Context

Figure 16

1. **Emphasized as unhelpful** 2. **Mentioned, but not heavily emphasized** 3. **Somewhat emphasized**
4. **Emphasized as helpful** 5. **Heavily emphasized as helpful** 6. **N/A**



The composite score of training and education in a local context was 4.3, meaning interviewees had a generally positive view, leaning slightly toward very positive. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 45.5%, meaning that just over half of interviewees felt this factor was important.

Interviewees—particularly those with a background of broader work in the IRF space—consistently emphasized the importance of training that is embodied in a local context. As one interviewee with government experience observed: “I’ve seen in so many countries, if an extremist group joins a government, if they can’t get the security services, then they want the Ministry of Education. They know if they can change the outlook of kids by just five degrees, you know, in 25 years, the country is in a very different place. And so we need to play in that space. We need to pour resources into that space and not just be focusing on reading, writing, arithmetic, which

is very important, but also preparing these kids to live in a diverse world and understand the importance of human rights” (Interview conducted March 10, 2021). An interviewee from the NGO sector agreed: “what I have found in many other countries like Iraq and others is that without a serious program for education in the country... you’ve got to literally deal with the majority that’s lost power and their fears and the minority that’s gaining power. You’ve got two different sides that you have to work through. And if you can’t address those issues, and they’re both sitting in a room and looking at each other and not trusting

one another... You have to address root causes to be able to move the country forward” (Interview conducted March 26, 2021). Education and training is a long-term, proactive investment, which makes it somewhat challenging for government or NGO actors with a short-term time horizon and a focus on demonstrating immediate, tangible results. Additionally, if not properly contextualized, educational efforts can be ineffective. As one interviewee explained: “I don’t teach people what language they should have, we teach them to think in a way that they can develop their own language for it. And I think, unfortunately, the failure of Western policy on these issues is that they probably do try to give them their own language. And it’s really more destructive than helpful” (Interview conducted March 26, 2021).

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 essential. Here, the point about letting local actors develop their own language is critical. As one interviewee expressed his approach: “I wouldn’t go to a new country and claim that I am an expert on religious freedom and I have the knowledge and that I am bringing it to you. I would go there as someone that wanted to really learn what’s going on in the country, seeking different context and understanding, and also sharing our experience here in the west with how we do it. And that’s the way I did it with them. You know, we are not imposing anything. We want to help you since you are basically convinced that religious freedom is important for the country, then we have a model that we use in the United States. So this is our model. You can customize it, use it. If you need support, we will do that. So it’s important to be humble as we go to a new country” (Interview conducted March 10, 2021).

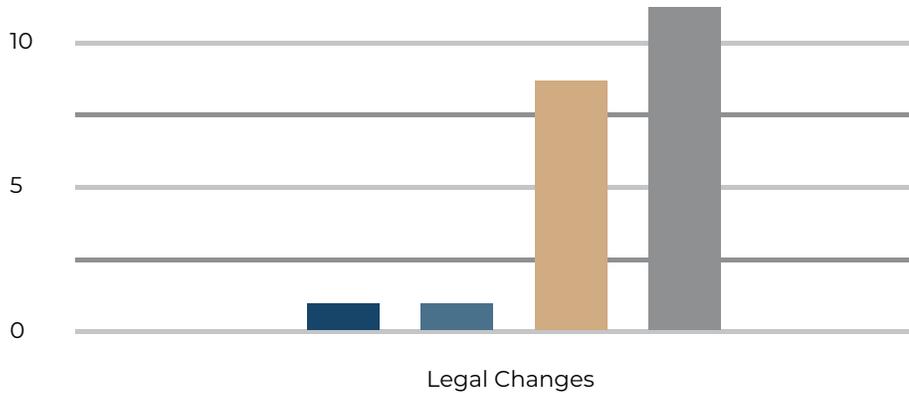
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5.3

Legal Changes

Figure 17

- 1. **Emphasized as unhelpful**
- 2. **Mentioned, but not heavily emphasized**
- 3. **Somewhat emphasized**
- 4. **Emphasized as helpful**
- 5. **Heavily emphasized as helpful**
- 6. **N/A**



The composite score of legal changes is 4.4, meaning that interviewees were positive leaning slightly toward very positive about its helpfulness. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 0%, meaning that all interviewees felt legal changes were important. One caveat is that our coding here may not have effectively differentiated between those who thought past legal changes were important to future success, and those who felt future legal changes were still needed.

Legal change is perhaps the area in which interviewees agreed the most progress had been made. Between the removal of the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy and the promise, within the Declaration of Principles, to enshrine separation of religion from state in the new constitution, Sudan has made considerable progress in this area in a short time. Still, interviewees saw the legal area as an important arena in the future as well. As one interviewee explained: “you need to have a good rule of law and a good legal system that people feel they can appeal to if these things happen. Because I think you’re not going to get a perfect law. You have to have the Constitution very

clear; separation of religion and state, no loopholes, because Egypt never had that” (Interview conducted on April 1, 2021). The most important areas moving forward are, first, ensuring that the promises of religious freedom made in the Declaration of Principles are fulfilled. Second, careful analysis of the regulations promulgated by the new government is essential. While some NGOs are already raising concerns about the creation of separate legal frameworks for the regulation of Christian and Muslim worship, more work should be done. In particular, it is important to carefully review the regulations 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.

Beyond this, it is important to make sure that any movement toward regional autonomy does not allow for religious freedom violations at a regional level. In describing the debate over Sharia between the SPLM and other rebel and opposition groups, one interviewee described the two positions: “Abdel-Aziz, through the will of the people, said we are willing to negotiate on anything but Sharia law. And they said Sharia law has been used in the past to oppress our people, and we believe that in the

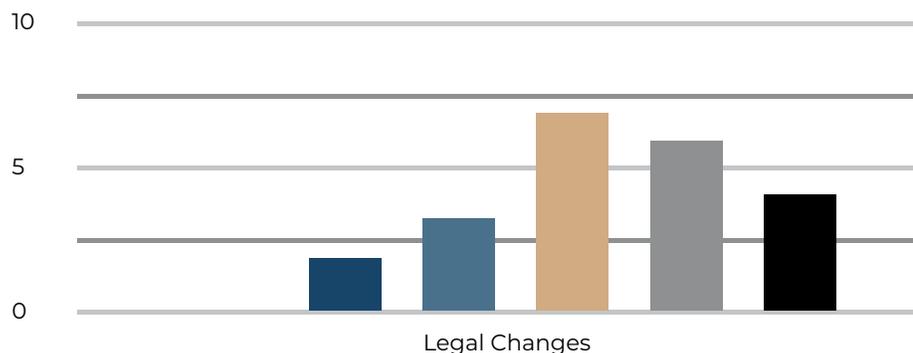
country there should not be Sharia law. The argument against that—and even something that caused division among other opposition groups as well—is that some said, well, what if we allow certain regions of Sudan to vote on which law governs them and if they vote yes, we want Islamic law, then they could have it” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). In other Muslim-majority countries that have allowed for local implementation of Sharia Law, such as Indonesia and Nigeria, this 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.

5.4

Cultural Changes

Figure 18

- 1. **Emphasized as unhelpful**
- 2. **Mentioned, but not heavily emphasized**
- 3. **Somewhat emphasized**
- 4. **Emphasized as helpful**
- 5. **Heavily emphasized as helpful**
- 6. **N/A**



The composite score of cultural changes is 3.9, meaning that interviewees were positive with a slight lean toward neutrality about its importance. The percentage of interviewees who answered N/A is 18.2%, meaning that just over three-quarters of interviewees thought cultural change was important. It is also possible that some of the neutrality or negativity in this score reflects a perception, expressed by some interviewees, that cultural change was difficult, or not yet really happening.

A general impression shared by our interviewees was that changes in culture were essential to the maintenance and expansion of IRF in Sudan. “I learned from Congressman Wolf that you can’t have a big impact on government until you change culture,” one interviewee said, “and we as the church have to change culture and the culture around Sudan had to be changed” (Interview conducted on February 17, 2021).

There were few specific proposals for cultural change—which seemed like something understood as a desirable end state more than a measurable objective. Some interviewees expressed concern that the types of conversations necessary for cultural change are not happening on the ground (Interview conducted March 26, 2021). Others were more optimistic: “more recently, I would say this is just for the past couple of months, there has been engagement of people in the north now engaging with those Diaspora in their Facebook live conversations... you have these new Diaspora that are coming on and they’re talking about some of these things. And then you see people from the north coming in and saying, hey, we got to try to make peace work. And I think those conversations of religious freedom are also intertwined in that. And the fact that you can have conversations with each other instead of just pointing at the other. And that goes both ways, you know, from the north to Nuba as well, because they’ve definitely felt the brunt of the oppression: Nuba and Darfur. So those conversations, I think, are very important in that they happen naturally” (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). Ultimately, cultural change is extraordinarily difficult to generate from the outside, and will rest on the efforts of Sudanese actors, who must be

empowered to pursue it in ways that fit their context.

Two other reforms could be highly beneficial for maintaining and advancing IRF in Sudan. First, IRF advocates must cultivate alliances with key Muslim actors within Sudan. As one interviewee said: “Also, having a discourse with the majority Muslim communities on the issue of religious freedom is quite important in the country. So it’s not only the government, it’s not only the minority religious groups, but the majority, we need to find a mechanism to promote them and have them actually own this and do it. We have to convince them theologically it is correct to do that” (Interview conducted March 8, 2021). 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.

Second, IRF advocates might consider regional IRF work focused on the Nuba mountains. Nuba is a region in which a strong culture of religious pluralism already exists. As one interviewee described it: “many Nuba will tell you this, and they’re always proud of it, in Nuba you’ll see people in a family who are Muslim and Christian and they always come together and they still enjoy each other’s company and they

respect each other's beliefs. And so there's always healthy dialogue there" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). As another interviewee pointed out, there is also a relationship between Sudan's ethnic pluralism and religious freedom: "Always remember, Sudan is a multi-ethnic group, it's not an Arab country... In the east you've got the Bejas, in the north you have the Nubians, and in the west you have the Nuba and the Darfurian, and then Gasana. And so all these groups, once you know their ethnic origin... Then you will understand, Sudan is not an Arab country. And that will dictate how you approach issues of religious freedom within that country" (Interview conducted with IRF observer, March 8, 2021). Bearing this in mind, developing a strong regional model of religious freedom that also demonstrates the ethnic pluralism of the country could prove quite beneficial. One interviewee provided a particularly powerful example of this culture: "we would bring Muslims and Christians together in a community like in some cases in the past, when we were building

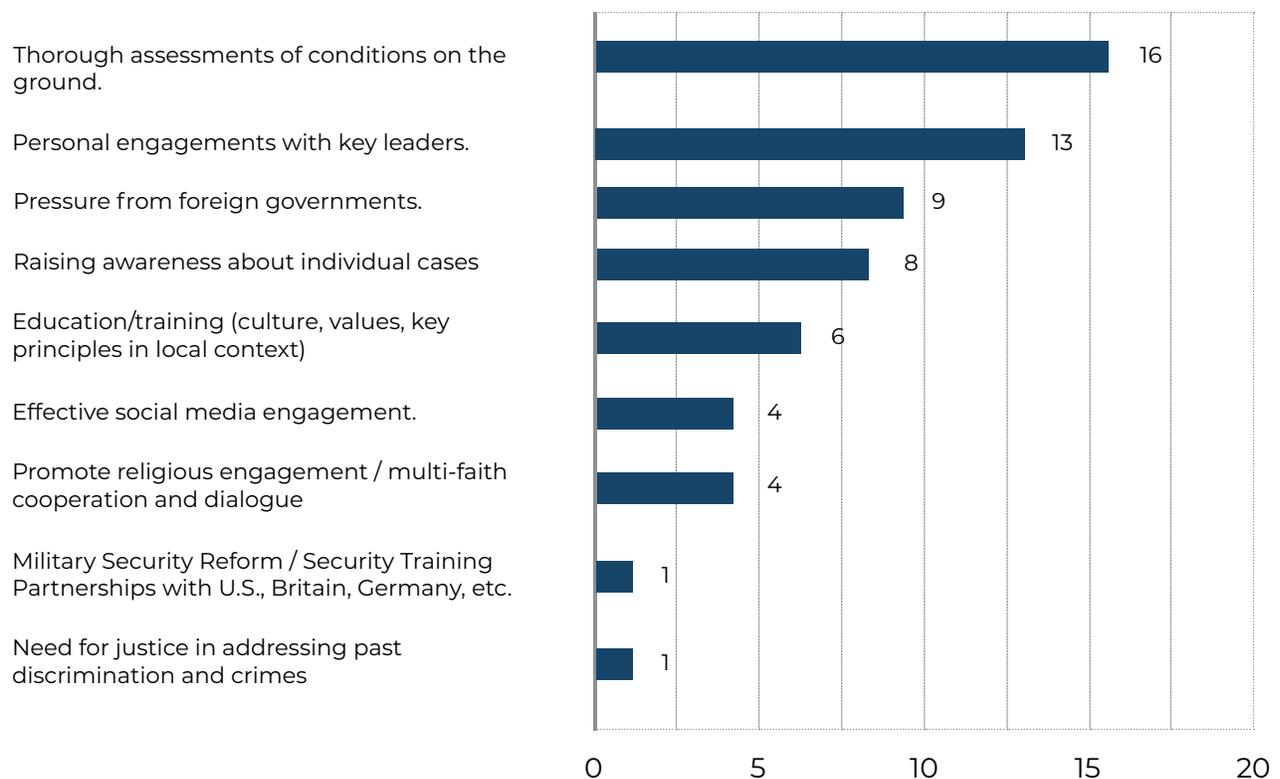
the churches, some of the people in the Muslim community would say, yeah, the church, we want to help you build the church because we saw how it was destroyed and we want to help... We're Muslims, but we can help you rebuild it" (Interview conducted April 15, 2021). It would be wise for IRF advocates to work to embed this culture of pluralism within robust institutions that promote and preserve IRF in the region. 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.

Implications for Broader IRF Promotion Efforts

Finally, our interviewees recommended some best practices that applied not only to Sudan, but to IRF promotion in general. We asked our interviewees to recommend some best practices, then identified common trends across interviews through content analysis.

Figure 19

Which of the following was identified as a “best practice” in your interview? this is something that the interviewee believes would be useful to apply in cases beyond Sudan. (Please select all that apply). 22 responses.



We found that 72.7% mentioned thorough assessments of conditions on the ground, and 59.01% mentioned personal engagements with key leaders, making these the two best practices agreed upon by the widest selection of interviewees. 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 grassroots networks to encourage positive change. That said, neither approach is ultimately sustainable without the other.

In analyzing the interviews, we also noted a few blind spots that could be indicative of critical gaps in the IRF infrastructure. For example, aside from these two widespread best practices, most of the others identified in our analysis strongly correlated with the things the interviewee's organization was already doing. In other words, not surprisingly, our interviewees tended toward high confidence that what they did worked and was a best practice. This is, of course, not surprising, but given general trends in the region, it also may not be particularly dispositive.

Moreover, international IRF advocates seemed generally less aware of either the political dynamics or the major religious organizations within Sudan. This was particularly true where Muslim organizations were concerned: even some of the international advocates most emphatic about the need for local contextualization seemed largely unaware of the role played by Sufi tariqas in Sudanese Islam. International advocates were also largely unaware of the role played in the Sudanese revolution by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and their rivalry with Iran. In general, Sudanese local nationals were somewhat more aware of and forthcoming about these dynamics, but it tended to be those who were not professional human rights advocates who were most aware of these geopolitical impacts. Further thought should be given to ways in which these critical gaps can be closed—thereby undoubtedly making IRF advocacy more effective.

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