

Table of Contents

- ***Sharia in Sudan v. women and religious freedom***
 - ***Sudan woman in legal limbo over refusal to cover hair***
 - ***Sudanese official hails secular system in S. Sudan***
 - ***Sudanese woman faces ordeal as convert from Islam***
 - ***Sudanese government detains over fifty Christians***
-

Sharia in Sudan v. women and religious freedom

Washington Times (25.11.2013) - Earlier this fall, a Sudanese business owner and women's rights activist defied a police demand that she cover her hair to satisfy their application of Sudan's laws on personal dress. Amira Osman Hamed now faces the prospect of corporal punishment in the form of forty lashes if convicted of the charges brought against her. Earlier this month, her hearing was postponed while the government prepared a response to her challenge to relevant portions of its criminal code.

Hamed's case highlights how Sudan's women bear the brunt of a brutal legal system rooted in a draconian interpretation of Islamic (Sharia) law and corresponding hudood, or classes of crimes with set punishments. The same regime which openly harbored Osama bin Laden and other international terrorists nearly a generation ago continues to trample on the fundamental rights of its own people, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In accordance with the recommendation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. government continues to designate Sudan as a country of particular concern, marking it a world-class violator of religious liberty. For Sudan to merit the withdrawal of this designation, serious reforms are needed, and the United States, along with other nations, must do more to help instigate change in decades-old practices.

Khartoum laid the foundation for its freedom-abusing system 30 years ago, in September 1983, when it imposed Sharia on its people, including non-Muslims in the predominantly Christian and animist south. Imposing Sharia helped ignite Sudan's 20-year, north-south civil war, leading to the deaths of more than two million Sudanese and to South Sudan's secession in 2011. Khartoum's action continues to fuel support for anti-government rebels in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states.

Under the Sudanese regime's interpretation of Sharia, floggings and amputations have been instituted for criminal offenses and broadcast on television.

In 1991, two years after seizing power in a bloodless coup, Sudan's current president, Omar al-Bashir, made a bad situation worse, implementing the current criminal code which applied punishments not only to criminal conduct but to harmless personal behavior, irrespective of faith or belief.

The 1991 Act identifies and harshly punishes infractions, including hudood offenses, which violate "public order." Such offenses include drinking alcohol, apostasy (rida), adultery (zina), defamation, unchastity (qazf), armed robbery (hiraba), and capital theft. These offenses carry fixed sentences that include death by hanging, stoning, crucifixion, and flogging.

In a profound attack on religious freedom, those convicted of apostasy, for example, may be sentenced to death.

Under the guise of protecting morality and preventing the co-mingling of the sexes, which is deemed "prostitution," government officials have deployed the public order regime against unmarried men and women alike who dare to share office space and taxi rides or attend parties together. But the public order regime disproportionately harms women and girls, especially those from religious and ethnic minority communities.

Each year, hundreds of Muslim and Christian women and girls are flogged for "indecent or immoral dress." Because the law fails to define "indecent" dress, arresting officers and prosecuting judges are free to impose their own views arbitrarily on others. In Hamed's case, authorities deemed it "indecent" to refuse to wear the hijab or Muslim head scarf. Such actions are contrary to international religious freedom standards which clearly protect the right of Hamed and others to wear or not wear religious dress.

How should the United States respond to these abuses of religious freedom and other human rights?

First, it should spotlight the plight of Amira Osman Hamed and women like her.

Second, our government, along with our allies, should urge Sudan to abide by international standards of freedom of religion or belief by amending or repealing the 1991 Criminal Act and subsequent laws and practices which infringe on religious liberty and related rights.

Lastly, the U.S. should make clear that normalization of relations with the United States hinges on respect for religious freedom and other human rights. Simply stated, a regime that fails to renounce the use of terror against its own people cannot be trusted to cease its support for terrorizing citizens of other nations.

Amira Osman Hamed and others in Sudan have taken a courageous stand for freedom and we must stand with them.

Sudan woman in legal limbo over refusal to cover hair

France 24 (04.11.2013) - A Sudanese woman accused of "indecent" attire because she refused to cover her hair remains in legal limbo after a court appearance on Monday.

Amira Osman Hamed faces a possible whipping if convicted of violating Sudan's laws governing morality, which took effect after the 1989 Islamist-backed coup by President Omar al-Bashir.

The defence asked in September that the charge be withdrawn but the prosecution is still weighing how to proceed, Hamed and one of her lawyers told AFP after Monday's hearing in Jebel Aulia, just outside Khartoum.

The court is waiting for the prosecutor to either send the file back to court for additional hearings, or to quash the case, Hamed said.

No new date has been set for a further hearing, but one of her lawyers, Kamal Omar, told AFP that "this does not mean the case is finished".

Hamed said she thought that her case would not be quashed immediately.

"I think they will keep it (active) for a while," she said. "If they want to use it any time they will. I'm not free."

Under Sudanese law all women are supposed to cover their hair with a "hijab" but Hamed refuses, saying authorities "want us to be like Taliban women."

Her case has attracted international publicity and drawn support from rights activists.

She said she was charged after refusing a policeman's order to cover her head while visiting a government office in Jebel Aulia in late August.

In 2009, the case of journalist Lubna Ahmed al-Hussein led to a global outcry and spotlighted women's rights in Sudan.

Hussein was fined for wearing slacks in public but she refused to pay. She spent one day behind bars but others rounded up with her in a restaurant were flogged.

Sudanese official hails secular system in S. Sudan

Sudan Tribune (08.10.2013) - The Sudanese state minister at the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments Mohamed Mustafa al-Yakooti described South Sudan's adoption of a secular system as "positive", in an unusual admission by an official from Khartoum's Islamist government.

Al-Yakooti mentioned that there is no tendency in South Sudan to coerce the Muslim population there to take on a specific ideology which offers an opportunity for expanding Islamic proselytizing activities there.

The official told the consultative coordination meeting on the executive program with the Islamic Council of Southern Sudan in Khartoum on Tuesday that his ministry is seeking to upgrade a memorandum of understanding with the council to a higher partnership.

He stressed that the expansion of the proselytizing movement in the south is a religious duty.

Around 10% of South Sudan's population is Muslim. The region seceded from Sudan on 9 July 2011 as part of a peace deal that ended decades of civil war, which was often categorized as one between Sudan's predominantly Islamic north and Christian south.

Many critics assert that the separation of Sudan into north and south in July 2011 was in part a result of Khartoum's insistence on Islamic law.

Sudanese officials including president Bashir made it clear that following South Sudan's independence the upcoming constitution will be "100% Islamic".

Muslims in South Sudan are believed to be generally well treated though they have filed complaints with the government regarding their properties consisting of buildings that they claim are confiscated by state governments.

By contrast, since early 2013 Sudanese authorities have started scrutinizing the activities of Christian organizations in the country.

Following the detention of a recent convert to Christianity and several Coptic Church representatives in December 2012, authorities have reportedly destroyed several churches in and around the Khartoum area.

A number of foreigners accused of proselytizing were also deported, while authorities conducted raids on a number of religious institutions, confiscating books to check on their content.

Several church-affiliated institutions such as orphanages or schools have also been closed, according to the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, a global ecumenical church body.

In April 2012, a violent crowd ransacked the compound of a Presbyterian church in Khartoum, burning Bibles and looting the buildings.

In a separate incident last June, bulldozers sent by officials from the ministry of planning and housing destroyed two church buildings belonging to the St John Episcopal Church in Khartoum, claiming worshipers lacked a permit to occupy the land.

Sudanese woman faces ordeal as convert from Islam

Long before current crackdown in Sudan, Muslim society punished 'apostates.'

Morning Star News (17.09.2013) - After her family in Khartoum, Sudan nearly buried her alive for leaving Islam and authorities imprisoned her for six months, a Sudanese Christian thought she might find refuge in Ethiopia.

She had fled to Ethiopia in 2010, five years after putting her faith in Christ. By the following year, she found herself face-to-face with hostile Sudanese officials.

"Some security personnel from the Sudan Embassy in Addis Ababa informed me that I must leave Ethiopia because I was an infidel," the 35-year-old woman, whose name is withheld for security reasons, told Morning Star News.

Now in South Sudan, which split from Sudan on July 9, 2011, she still lives in hiding. Sudanese Muslims in South Sudan, she says, are monitoring her movements.

She had come to faith when a Christian woman told her about the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus, and soon she began attending church. When her family learned of her conversion, she said, they locked her in a dark room for six months and arranged visits from an Islamic sheikh who struck her 10 times each day.

"After six months, I was released and was very frustrated and went into hiding, but my family discovered where I was hiding in Khartoum and reported to the police that I had left Islam," she said.

Her family learned of her hiding place, found and beat her, and threw her from a second floor landing.

"I was bleeding and my ribs were broken," she said, tears streaming from her eyes.

Family members threatened to charge her with apostasy unless she repented and returned to Islam, telling her, "You are an infidel, you are no longer a good Muslim," she said. Apostasy is punishable by death in Sudan, which upholds sharia (Islamic law) as a source of legislation, according to the U.S. Department of State.

"They called a Muslim sheikh to force me to repent and come back to Islam, but I refused the attempt," she said, adding that the sheikh would later accuse her of "being possessed by an evil spirit, which he said was a Christian evil spirit."

Family members hid her in the trunk of their car and took her home with the intent of burying her alive, she said. She felt close to death, she said, and by keeping her hidden, the family hoped Muslim neighbors would accept that her absence meant she had met her expected end as an apostate. The neighbors, however, called police.

"They dug the grave, and as they were putting me into the grave, the police entered the house," she said. "I believe it was the Lord Jesus who made the police arrive on time and saved me from that inevitable death."

Officers arrested family members for attempted murder, but they were later released.

After a few days of recovery, she managed to escape again; this time, security officials endeavored to track her down.

"Security started to search for me everywhere, accusing me of leaving Islam," she said. When National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) officials caught up with her four years later, in early 2009, they incarcerated her for one month, she said.

After her release, in March 2009 she tried to flee the country by air. Authorities were notified, removed her from an airliner about to take off from Khartoum International Airport and confiscated her passport.

During interrogation, NISS personnel tortured her as punishment for leaving Islam and trying to flee the country, she said. She was imprisoned for another six months at Omdurman Prison for Women.

"The security officials took my documents, and after serving six months of imprisonment, I decided to go into hiding and sought refuge in the house of some Christians in Khartoum who gave me food and shelter and took care for me," she said.

These ordeals took place before the 2011 secession that opened the way for harsher treatment of Christians in Sudan, as President Omar al Bashir vowed to adopt a stricter version of sharia (Islamic law) and recognize only Islamic culture and the Arabic language. The estimated 300,000 to 500,000 Christians in Sudan have suffered increased arrests and deportations and destruction of church buildings and affiliated centers, and foreign Christians have been driven out, church leaders say. In a report issued in April, Christian Solidarity Worldwide noted an increase in arrests, detentions and deportations of Christians since December 2012.

Freedom of religion is a key provision of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sudan is a signatory. Due to its treatment of Christians and other human rights violations, Sudan has been designated a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. State Department since 1999, and in April the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended the country remain on the list this year.

After her six months in prison, eventually the convert from Islam managed to cross into neighboring Ethiopia by land in 2010, only to encounter more threatening Sudanese officials. Even now in predominantly Christian and animist South Sudan, she describes her life as "fear and agony," as there seems to be nowhere to hide from hostile Islamists.

Sudanese government detains over fifty Christians

CSW (20.02.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that at least 55 Christians have been detained by the Sudanese government for approximately two weeks without charge.

According to CSW's sources, the group, which has no political affiliations and includes church leaders, has been falsely accused of receiving money from foreign countries, including Israel.

The arrests are the latest development in a wave of repression that began towards the end of last year targeting Christians working in voluntary organisations, and that has reportedly resulted in the deportations of around 100 foreign workers, while a number of Sudanese Christians have been detained for questioning by the security services. According to local reports, the repression was preceded by a media campaign against "Christianisation", and was accompanied by the closure of a number of Christian-affiliated schools, colleges and training centres.

There have been concerns about increasing pressure on churches in Sudan since the creation of South Sudan in 2011. President Al-Bashir has repeatedly stated that Sudan's new constitution would be 100 percent Islamic. The president has also claimed that "all parties, religious sects and Sufis" would be represented in the constitutional drafting committee; however, no further details have been given about its progress.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned at these arbitrary arrests and news of an escalating crackdown on Christian citizens in Sudan. We urge the Sudanese government to release these prisoners and end its campaign of harassment against the Christian community. We also urge the government once again to undertake broad consultations during the drafting of the new constitution and to ensure that it recognises the rights of all Sudanese citizens, to freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Sudan is a signatory."
