

Testimony of Steven M. Harris
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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
"Protecting Civil Society, Faith-Based Actors, and Political Speech in Sub-Saharan Africa"
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is an honor to join you today. On behalf of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, I would like to express our gratitude for the ongoing efforts of this subcommittee to keep track of, and bring visibility to, the vulnerable and the voiceless on the continent of Africa. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is the public policy arm of the nation's largest Protestant denomination with 15.2 million members in 46, 000 churches. Consistent with our focus on advocating for human dignity, religious liberty, the family, and justice issues in the United States, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission advances the same agenda abroad, seeking to bring international awareness to human rights violations, religious persecution, and injustice around the globe.

Given today's focus on the contracting civil society space in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and my topic of religious persecution in particular, I thought it appropriate to begin my testimony by laying bare the philosophical presuppositions that give legitimacy to a concern for religious freedom. In other words, "Why does it matter that we take into account the plight of religious communities in our overall analysis concerning both the state of certain African governments and the attending question of normalization with the same?" Firstly, it cannot be rehearsed enough that the right to be religiously free—to worship or not to worship according to the dictates of one's own conscience—is a right that stands at the heart of what it means to be human. Secondly, as we consider whether certain democratic ideals are taking root in a particular country, it is important to remember that the consent to be governed does not include state ownership over the conscience. When religious freedom is not protected, myriad human rights violations, various forms of violence, and overall destabilization is usually the result. This sentiment has been expressed by officials of our current administration. Moreover, scholars have argued that one of the effects of civil society—religious community being a significant part thereof—is the checking of state power and the resisting of corrupt authoritarian rule and overall undemocratic impulses. Therefore, thirdly, the suppression of religious freedom can be correlated not only with safety concerns for the people of a given state but also with broader global security concerns—including U.S. national security.

With this ideological backdrop in mind, I will now devote the balance of my testimony to the status of religious minorities in Sudan, and religious communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. I will conclude by offering a few principal suggestions for a relational pathway forward.

I. SUDAN

In Sudan, the human rights record in general, and religious freedom conditions in particular, remains poor. President al-Bashir and his National Congress Party have been in power for over a quarter-century. Attending this rule, ongoing sites of repression, restriction, and multifarious governmental attacks on civilians has been normative. In February of this year, it was reported that an evangelical church building in Khartoum was demolished on the charge of public disturbances. However, reports indicate that the land is desired for Muslim business interests. The 29-year-old church building belonged to the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church, and was one of 27 churches that the Sudanese government indicated would soon be demolished because of similar charges (two churches on this list were demolished in 2017, one being a Sudanese Church of Christ building which served as the church home to 300 members and the last Christian church in the region). Since 2014, the government has prohibited the construction of new church buildings.

In addition to the destruction and confiscation of church property, government officials continue to harass and arrest church leaders. On April 4, 2017, a church elder, Mr. Yonan Abdullah, died after being stabbed during a raid on the Sudanese Presbyterian Evangelical Church school. Just last month, four Christians associated with a protest of the aforementioned raid faced new charges of physical harm to police, with reports of an additional 36 Christians associated with the church to stand trial.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2018 report redesignated Sudan as a Country of Particular Concern. Though the Interim National Constitution of Sudan includes religious freedom protections and recognizes Sudan as a multi-religious country, article 5 essentially restricts freedom of religion by privileging Islamic Sharia law and popular consensus as a leading source of government legislation. Moreover, President al-Bashir has stated a desire that Sharia be codified as constitutional law. In light of the priority of Sharia law application, the Sudanese Criminal Code continues to uphold apostasy laws making conversion from Islam punishable by death.

The task set before this subcommittee and the broader congressional deliberative body is the accurate interpretation and assessment of these ongoing realities. Cited increased humanitarian access, counterterrorism efforts, and even the recent recognition of the Seventh Day Adventist Church as a legal religion, all have occurred within a broader trend of human rights violations, toleration of extremists, and religious intolerance—an intolerance that was on full display even as the United States was reviewing the country's behavior in view of sanction reconsideration. We believe this trend reveals that the Sudanese regime's ideological commitments are

incompatible with the requirements of a religiously tolerant state, and any United States action ought to be directed at these core commitments.

II. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo cannot be understood apart from the political crisis surrounding President Kabila and his refusal to step down in 2016. Since then, there have been reports of ongoing violent protests amid a rise of inter-ethnic conflict and insecurity. Human Rights Watch reports that “between August 2016 and September 2017, violence involving Congolese security forces, government-backed militias, and local armed groups left up to 5,000 people dead.” In that time, about 1.5 million people were displaced from their homes, including tens of thousands of fleeing refugees. Millions are presently facing extreme hunger and starvation.

Catholic priests and other Christians have been either murdered or detained by police for participating in protests against President Kabila. In early April, it was reported that another Catholic priest had been abducted for ransom. The church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been a long, outspoken proponent of democracy and freedom, historically serving as a moral voice against the corrupt consolidation of power.

It will be imperative that the United States closely follow, and continue to exert pressure for, the impending presidential elections to be held in December. Integral to the overall hope and vision of a free and flourishing Democratic Republic of the Congo is a peaceful, democratic transfer of power.

III. RWANDA

In March of this year, it was reported that over 700 churches had been closed in Rwanda, a majority Christian country. The alleged reason for the closings were building safety, hygiene, and reports of noise violations. Six pastors were arrested and accused of masterminding a ploy to undermine the government’s plans. The closings have incited much debate concerning freedom of expression in Rwanda. While government authorities claim god-honoring motivations, others in the civil society and development space view the closings as yet another manifestation of governmental fear regarding the spread of anti-government sentiments. Critical of the closings, one commentator suggested that the churches were the indeed the last open space for “daring to imagine and talk about change.”

This subcommittee previously heard testimony in a prior hearing regarding the Rwandan government's ongoing suppression of critical opinion. Civil society groups and the media struggle to function independently and freely in an ever-shrinking societal space. Many have praised Rwanda for its remarkable economic development, and rightfully so. However, a shrinking civil society, essentially closed political space, and human rights limitations threaten the longevity of such development, as well as peace and security in Rwanda and the broader region.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Consistent with many of the recommendations of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's Sudan report, we strongly urge that religious freedom be a serious factor taken into account as a foreign policy priority as the United States considers the nature of its relationships to these African countries. Governmental structures, and the ideologies that undergird them, must be addressed. Religious freedom cannot be expected when it is concurrently undermined by constitutional order. Targeted tools and broad diplomacy efforts ought to be utilized in order to attain measurable improvements.

With respect to Sudan in particular, we oppose the normalization of relations until a measurable impact on the ground for religious freedom and the health of civil society can be observed. There are discussions about removing Sudan from the State Sponsor of Terror list, and we have significant concerns with this action absent a local improvement on human rights in general and religious liberty in particular.