

Sudanese Christians join popular protests, call for religious freedom

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by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

A Roman Catholic bishop in Sudan has charged that the largely Muslim country's popular revolution will be hollow if it does not also deliver freedom of worship for non-Muslim faiths.

"A civil society movement has for the first time brought all Sudanese people together, and the church is part of it," said Yunan Tombe Trille Kuku Andali, bishop of the Diocese of El Obeid in south-central Sudan. After 70 years of restrictions on the church's activities, he wants to see the laws that impede religious freedom change.

Members of Sudan's Christian minority, particularly young people, have taken a prominent role in the demonstrations that began in December, protesting cuts in government subsidies for bread and fuel. The protests eventually led the military to depose President Omar al-Bashir on April 10. Then the crowds on the streets outside army headquarters began pressing the military's governing council to step aside in favor of civilians. In late April protesters gained another of their demands when three generals viewed as being aligned with al-Bashir stepped down, the BBC reported. One of the generals was also known for arresting people to enforce a conservative version of Islam.

At least 38 people have died since the start of the protests; human rights groups say the number is higher.

Christian groups have held prayer gatherings and worship services during the protests, with Muslims often joining in the singing of hymns.

Sudan's constitution guarantees freedom of worship, but Islam has remained the de facto state religion and Shari'a, or Islamic, law governs many civic institutions. Preaching by non-Muslims is officially banned. Religious groups are required to register with the government as nonprofit NGOs, and their activities and personnel are closely watched. Church leaders have also been frequently arrested and harassed by the national intelligence service.

In Christian villages in the Nuba Mountains, in the south of the country, hospitals and schools have sustained frequent aerial bombardment, in what church leaders see as government attempts to eradicate Christianity from the region.

The protests have provided all Christian groups the opportunity to demand more freedom.

Rafaat Sameer Masaad, head of the Evangelical Synod in Sudan, spoke at a prayer service outside army headquarters on April 14 that was attended by leaders from Sudanese Protestant churches, including Presbyterians, Baptists, and the Sudan Church of Christ. He told the crowd that life for Jesus' followers in Sudan was still difficult 2,000 years after Jesus led a revolution against slavery, injustice, division, and hatred.

"The state treats us as a bunch of foreign spies working to destroy our homeland," Masaad said. "But we thank God for the awakening of our conscience during this revolution."

The protests, he added, were a chance for the people to go beyond religious divisions to build "an inclusive unifying Sudanese national identity." —Religion News Service

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