

## South Sudanese Muslims

Muslims have been a minority in South Sudan since its independence from Sudan in 2011 after a long and drawn out civil war. With the Animists who follow indigenous religions constituting the majority, Muslims account for 20% of the country's population. Christians account for a slightly larger portion of the population than Muslims.

The history of Islam in the area goes back to the early period of Africa's process of Islamization. Even in the pre-Islamic era, there were commercial ties between the indigenous Nubians and Arabs. Having conquered Egypt in the 7th century, the armies of Islam advanced southward, controlling the area that is now the Republic of Sudan. Having become home to small indigenous communities adhering to African religions, in the 1800s the territories of South Sudan were annexed by the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, who brought the area under the control of a central authority. The Ottoman influence in the area diminished along with its place in international politics and, from 1899 onward, Ottoman rule was replaced completely by British rule.

Under 56 years of British colonial rule, while Muslim Arabs constituted the majority in the north, Christian Africans increased in number in the south as a result of increasing missionary activities. Conducting anthropological research in the area, Western scientists revealed ethnic differences between the north and the south, and thus the first seeds of separation in the region were planted.

The civil war that broke out right after independence was achieved in 1955 fed off both this north-south divide and the Cold War conditions of the day. Indeed, the opposition developed a relationship with the Soviet Union as a result of the oppressive regime in the north holding a position of ideological proximity to the West and being in turn affected by the socioeconomic problems between the north-south divisions.

In 1972, South Sudan gained autonomous status. This process, which was not endorsed wholeheartedly by the Muslim minority, triggered a new and more intense civil war that broke out in 1983. In an effort to divide Sudan, Western countries provided all kinds of support to the conflict that lasted until 2005. Arms that had been bought from the West claimed the lives of thousands in a war between the Northern Sudanese and the Southern Sudanese, wounded tens of thousands, and forced hundreds of thousands into exile. This civil war that broke out in the 1980s had more religious overtones than the earlier one. The separatist groups in the south gained another source of justification for their cause when, in an effort to support America's Cold War policies, the Sudanese administration of the period started to implement conservative policies against communism. Especially after the coup led by Omar al-Bashir in 1989, in an effort to sabotage the process of Islamization in the north, Western countries resorted to representing the struggle in the south as the Christians' struggle for their rights.

While a portion of the Muslim minority migrated to the north during the independence referendum of 2011, a significant part voted for independence and chose to remain in the south. This division between the Muslims of South Sudan is for the most part due to ethnic motivations. After all, considering themselves to be distinct from the majority in the north who are of Arab descent, southern Muslims, along with Animist communities, have always had grievances regarding socioeconomic neglect and discrimination. The administration in Khartoum was gravely disappointed in the attitude of the Muslims of South Sudan during the separation process.

After the separation, the South Sudanese administration took numerous steps toward gaining the loyalty of the Muslim minority. One of these steps was the adoption of religious freedoms and the principle of coexistence. Furthermore, efforts were made to return all territories seized from Muslims and to stop expropriation.

The Muslim minority in the country is represented by a body called the *South Sudan Muslim Council*. In addition to its role in regulating the relations between the government and Muslims, the council can also act as an intermediary between the two to help solve problems.

While promising the most comprehensive freedoms relating to individual religious practices, the South

Sudanese administration does not refrain from intimidating the Muslim minority by making it clear that political activity will not be tolerated. State officials take every opportunity to repeat that they will not tolerate any organization threatening the country's political stability and security. Due to ethnic civil war and economic problems, the Muslim minority has been having an increasingly bad time since 2014.

Levels of education and poverty emerge as the most significant problems in the country. However, these problems do not result from a discernible policy of discrimination, but rather have to do with the country's level of development.

Surface area: 644,329 km<sup>2</sup>

Population: 11,562,695

Muslim population: 20%

Capital: Juba

Official language: English