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SUDAN | Church Challenges Government Interference

The Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) is challenging a government decision to impose an unelected leadership committee on the church. The Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments, which oversees religious affairs in Sudan, appointed an alternative Executive Committee of the SCOC, led by Angelo Alzaki, to manage church affairs.

The appointment came to light Aug. 23 when eight senior SCOC leaders were arrested and charged with trespassing on the church headquarters and refusing to hand over control of the church to Alzaki. They were released on bail later that day. Seven of the eight leaders arrested, including the Chair Rev. Ayoub Tilyan, are members of the SCOC Executive Committee which was elected by the church and leads the denomination in operational and spiritual matters.

During their detention, the prosecutor confirmed that the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments had registered Alzaki as chair of the SCOC Executive Committee. The SCOC's leadership is challenging the government's decision as it violates the internal procedures of the denomination.

The SCOC Executive Committee is elected every three years by the SCOC General Assembly. The last election was held June 18, 2015, and the next election is slated for June 18, 2018. The Executive Committee received reports at the beginning of August indicating that elections had been held for a new executive committee that was attempting to gain control of the church, but these were dismissed by the SCOC leadership, who were confident that any attempts to register a new committee with the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments would fail since the required internal processes had not been observed.

The experiences of SCOC mirror those of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC), where a government-backed church committee that was not constituted in accordance with church procedures, has sold church land to developers.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned by the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments' decision to impose an illegitimate leadership committee on the Sudanese Church of Christ, in a worrying parallel of the situation with the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We call on the Ministry to reverse this decision and to recognise the elected leadership committee chaired by Rev. Ayoub Tilyan. The serious and persistent interference in church affairs entails multiple violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, which the government is constitutionally and internationally obligated to uphold and protect."

The SCOC denomination is a predominantly Nuban church and has experienced both religious and ethnic discrimination. In 2016, two members of its executive committee, Reverends Kuwa Shamal and Hassan Abduraheem, were tried for national security crimes. In January 2017, Rev. Shamal was cleared of all charges and Rev. Abduraheem was released after receiving a presidential pardon in May 2017. Rev. Shamal is among the leaders charged with trespass on Aug. 23.

In May 2017, two SCOC properties were demolished without notice including the only remaining church property in the Soba Aradi district of Khartoum. In 2016, several SCOC leaders were arbitrarily detained by National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) agents and had their passports confiscated. The SCOC Executive Committee has spoken out against the government-sanctioned repression that the denomination has been experiencing and believes this is why Alzaki's pro-government committee gained official recognition.

"We call on the Sudanese government to review the Ministry's recognition of committees created in violation of church procedures and to ensure that from now onwards its decisions are in compliance with the internal practices and procedures of religious organisations. We also call on the African Union, European Union and U.S. government to urge Sudan to comply with its international obligations to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief, which includes non-interference in the internal process of religious organizations," Thomas said.