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SUDAN | Religious Leaders Unjustly Convicted

Two leaders of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) were unjustly convicted on Oct. 30 of criminal misappropriation and criminal trespass. Rafat Obid, chairman of the SEPC Lands and Buildings Committee and Rev. Daniel William, deputy chairman of the same committee, were found guilty by a court in Khartoum, and were both required to pay a fine of approximately \$750 each. The case against the men stems from a dispute between the SEPC's Lands and Buildings Committee and a government-backed but illegitimate committee.

In March 2013, the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments authorized the illegitimate committee, which was convened in violation of church procedure, to act on the SEPC's behalf. The legitimate church committee, led by Obid, was elected in accordance to the church rules. Despite an August 2015 ruling in its favor by the Khartoum Administrative Court, it has been unable to resume its work because it lacks formal recognition from the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments. Despite this interference in church affairs, the Sudanese government has attempted to portray the dispute as an internal church matter.

Since being recognized by the government in March 2013, the illegitimate committee has attempted to seize control of church affairs and has sold church properties to private investors. Obid and Rev. William were initially questioned and arrested in April 2016. Their trial began officially in January 2017. The case was initiated by the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments which accused the men of falsely presenting themselves as members of the legitimate SEPC Land and Buildings Committee.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said, "We condemn the unjust trial and conviction of Mr. Obid and Rev. William. We call on the judiciary to review the ruling immediately, to acquit the men and to reimburse the fines they have paid. We also call on the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments to implement the August 2015 administrative court decision and to authorize the committee led by Mr. Obid to act on behalf of the church."

Government interference in church affairs has also extended to the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC). In August, the leadership of the SCOC challenged a government decision to impose an unelected leadership on the church. Eight leaders of the church's Executive Leadership Committee were arrested and charged with trespass for refusing to hand over control of the church to the government-backed committee.

On Oct. 22, five leaders of the SCOC in Omdurman were arrested after they refused to comply with a police order to suspend their Sunday worship service. Those arrested included Rev. Ayoub Tilyan, chairman of the church Executive Leadership Committee, and Reverend Ali Haakim Al Am, who leads the congregation. The five men were detained and questioned for over six hours before being charged with disturbing the peace. They were eventually released and are awaiting trial.

Thomas added, "We are deeply concerned by the use of the criminal justice system to violate the right to freedom of religion or belief in Sudan. These arrests of religious leaders and the order to prevent churches from holding services are violations of the constitutionally guaranteed right to religious freedom. We urge the Sudanese authorities to drop all charges against these church leaders, and to overturn the decision to impose an unelected leadership committee on the SCOC. We also call on the international community to urge Sudan to comply with its national and international commitments to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief."