

Sudan: End Crackdown on Civil Society

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Donors, Diplomats Should Insist on Respect for Free Speech, Association

(Nairobi, January 13, 2013) – [Sudan](#) should immediately rescind its decision to shut down four civil society organizations in Khartoum in December 2012, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should allow independent groups to operate freely and conduct peaceful protests.

International donors, diplomats, and organizations involved in Sudan, including the United Nations' independent expert on Sudan, should all insist the government halt its crackdown and repair the damage already done.

“Sudan should reverse its draconian steps against civil society groups, and international actors should publicly condemn such measures,” said [Daniel Bekele](#), Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The government-led campaign against Sudanese civil society organizations seems designed to stifle diversity, human rights, and dialogue on issues of critical importance, rather than to serve any legitimate purpose.”

On December 24, the Culture Ministry closed the Sudanese Studies Center (SCC), a cultural organization that promotes peace and democracy, for one year, based on a decision in November that the group was undermining national security and acting contrary to its mandate. The same ministry in November closed another cultural group, Beit al-Fanoon.

On December 31, the eve of Sudan's independence day, officials from the Interior Ministry's Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC) entered the Khartoum offices of the Khatim Adlan Center for Enlightenment and Human Development (KACE), which promotes cultural diversity, democracy, and dialogue, with a ministerial decree canceling its registration without explanation. Officials forced staff to evacuate and confiscated property. Separately, National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) summoned a Sudanese writer, Zeinab Beliel, and ordered the literary criticism forum she chairs to cease all activities.

HAC officials also ordered the shutdown of Arry, a group that promotes human rights in the Nuba Mountains of Southern Kordofan and in Blue Nile. Arry staff members told Human Rights Watch that security officials had attempted to arrest several members of the group in Khartoum in October and November, and on December 19 interrogated four staff members, threatened their families, and ordered them to stop the group's activities, citing alleged foreign links.

“The authorities shut down these groups on nebulous allegations and prevented them from seeking a legal remedy,” Bekele said. “They should rescind the administrative decisions immediately or let the groups appeal them, and return the seized assets.”

A government-led campaign against independent civil society surfaced publicly in August, when the far-right-wing newspaper al-Intibaha circulated a report by an American journalist listing organizations that receive funding from the United States. On December 24 the pro-government newspaper Akhir Lahza announced the government would begin a crackdown on nongovernmental organizations. On January 2, after authorities had already shut down several groups, First Vice President Ali Osman Taha told national television that the government would reveal and target other groups with links to the US Central Intelligence Agency, prompting fears of more closures.

The authorities have meanwhile prevented civil society groups and journalists from protesting the closures of the organizations and delivering complaints to relevant authorities. When a group of civil society activists demonstrated outside the National Human Rights Commission on December 30, security officials blocked them from delivering the complaint, beat up a journalist, and arrested three activists. The commission condemned

[<http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.ph...>](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.ph...)

these acts as violations of Sudan's interim constitution, media reports said. On January 6, activists again demonstrated in front of the Republican Palace, but security forces again dispersed them and officials refused to receive their complaint.

The crackdown reflects the ruling party's growing fragility and defensiveness toward independent voices of democracy, Human Rights Watch said. Official rhetoric against Western and secular influences has become more pitched in recent months, particularly in relation to a new constitution-making process. Leaders of the country's ruling National Congress Party (NCP), including President Omar al-Bashir, have repeatedly vowed to impose a strict version of Islamic law that would not accommodate diversity, while opposition groups have urged respect for religious and ethnic diversity and human rights. Sudan has not passed a new constitution despite South Sudan's secession in July 2011.

The recent closures also underscore wider repression that Human Rights Watch has documented following South Sudan's independence. In response to widespread popular protests in January 2011 and between June and early August 2012, authorities arrested thousands

[<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/11/...>](http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/11/...)

of protesters, activists, and opposition members, and detained hundreds, subjecting many of them to ill-treatment and torture. Authorities systematically targeted civil society groups during that crackdown, accusing them of links to the protesters and opposition groups. In recent months, authorities have prevented various groups from holding events on the constitution-making process, women's rights, and other topics of public concern.

Earlier in 2012, security officials cracked down heavily on the media, confiscating and censoring papers and blacklisting journalists

[<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/17/...>](http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/17/...)

in the wake of Sudan's clashes with South Sudanese forces at Heglig in April. Security forces also rounded up suspected opposition members and supporters

[<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/21/...>](http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/21/...)

when fighting between government forces and the rebel group, Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, spread from Southern Kordofan to Blue Nile in September 2011.

"The Sudanese government should respect and protect space for independent civil society to operate fully and freely," Bekele said. "The authorities should consider civil society an important ally in the pursuit of peace and stability but unfortunately Sudan's leaders are repudiating independent groups with even more repressive, intolerant, and defensive tactics."

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