

Washington Watch Interview of Faith McDonnell Hosted by Tony Perkins

Perkins: The left remains worked up over the recent draft report by the Commission on Unalienable Rights. The commission was formed last year by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as the 70th United States Secretary of State suggested it was time for an informed review of the role of human rights in our foreign policy so that our foreign policy will serve American interests and reflect American values. One of the major criticisms of the report is the prioritization of religious freedom as a foreign policy priority. And yet, because the Trump administration has made religious freedom the top foreign policy objective in this administration, the result has been that men women and children are experiencing freedom--not just religious freedom, but political freedoms as well.

Now, you might be tempted to ask, “why is promoting religious freedom in our foreign policy important? Why should we care?” First, as Christians, we not only recognize but also defend the rights of every person to choose to follow God. Of course, we want them to choose to follow God, and we want the freedom to encourage him to make that choice. But from my public policy standpoint, there is a growing body of research that reveals that when religious freedom is present, there is greater economic freedom and greater social stability, which ultimately means less of a national security issue for the US.

The case in point is the African country of Sudan. After more than 75 years of colonial rule by Britain and others, Sudan became an independent country back in 1956. At the time, Northern Sudan was predominantly Muslim and South Sudan was steeped in African cultural traditions as well as some Christian influence. When leaders wanted to unify the nation by forcefully applying Islamic laws and culture onto the entire country, a civil war between the northern leaders seeking this unification and those who were opposed to it (mostly in the South) resulted in a war that lasted from 1955 to 1972. Following a short-lived agreement that unified the three southern Sudanese provinces and allowed them autonomy, hostilities then resumed again in 1983. The Muslim Brotherhood exerted greater influence, increasing the presence of Sharia law.

Plagued by political economic and social instability, the government was overthrown by a Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation led by Lieutenant General Omar al Bashir, resulting in Sudan being under a harsh and punitive Islamist government for the last three decades. But all of that changed a little over a year ago, and while far from being a bastion of freedom, the country of 41 million people is experiencing historic changes--changes that include religious and political freedom.

My first encounter with the leadership of Sudan was in 2014 when I became involved in the case of Maryam Ibrahim, a young Sudanese mother who was convicted of apostasy and then sentenced to die. Marion was imprisoned in Khartoum along with her 18-month-old son. She was also pregnant with her second child at the time, which she would eventually give birth to in the prison while chained to the floor. International outcry and effective advocacy of several, including those who will join us today, led to her freedom. Under the new Sudanese transitional government led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, whom I met with in Sudan earlier this year,

they repealed that apostasy law--a major development in the pursuit of religious freedom for the Sudanese people. Marion Ibrahim will join us later to reflect on his monumental change. Also a champion for Marion and for the persecuted everywhere, former Virginia Congressman Frank Wolf who led the first congressional delegation to Darfur before awakening the world to the reality of genocide in Sudan. Congressman Wolf will help bring perspective to the changes in Sudan why we should take hold that it can happen elsewhere

We will be joined by Faith McDonnell who has been an advocate for the persecuted in Sudan for decades... She is the Director of Religious Liberty Programs and of the Church Alliance for a New Sudan at the institute on Religion and Democracy. She has been working for the persecuted church in Sudan and other African nations since 1993. She's been at this for a while. She has organized rallies for Sudan in front of the White House. In fact, she organized one for Marion that I participated in. She's held rallies at the State Department, the Canadian embassy, and the Sudanese embassy. She's drafted legislation on religious persecution for the Episcopal Church and for the United States Congress. She's been to Sudan and cultivated rich and strong relationships with believers there. She joins us now. Faith, welcome to Washington Watch.

McDonnell: Thank you, Tony. Great to be with you.

Perkins: We're focusing on Sudan after three decades of being under an Islamist government and we're seeing rays of hope. The apostasy laws are being repealed. What do you make of the developments in Sudan as it pertains to persecuted Christians?

McDonnell: Well Tony, we thank God for every step in the right direction. You and I both know that people have been praying about this for many years, so I'm happy about that. But I'm always cautious. I remember a book by the former vice president of Sudan at a time when there was peace before--a dear man by the name of Abel Alier--who wrote a book called *Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonored*, so I always want to make sure that we don't get ahead of ourselves in foreign policy with the US government thinking that everything is just peachy now and changing all of the things we put into place to keep Sudan from committing atrocities. I think the Christians in Sudan right now are very happy that things are changing, especially the end of the apostasy law, which is really remarkable, as well as the end of public flogging and female genital mutilation. But we still have a ways to go. I did hear one thing today which caused me some concern with the aid for the virus. There are Christians in Sudan who are being told that they have to convert to Islam before they get the food aid that is supposed to be going to everyone in Sudan. So, I don't know if that's a local thing. We're going to just have to start watching out for local governments that don't like what the civilian government is doing.

Perkins: There's no question that this is going to be a challenge. We see that in other countries. I've seen that in Egypt under El-sisi where they tried to move to more religious freedom, but when you get to some of the remote parts of Egypt, the word hasn't quite gotten there yet. I think with Sudan's very fragile infrastructure, there's going to be some ongoing challenges. You're right to urge caution, Faith. From the standpoint of your advocacy and the work that you have done for decades, this has to be encouraging and should encourage others if we do not lose heart.

Faith: Amen. It is very encouraging. Frankly, I never expected to see this. I didn't know what would happen. But when the people started to rise up after many years--the marginalized people groups like the Nuba, the Darfurians, and the Beja, trying to stand up for their rights and many people dying for those rights--then to be joined by the people in the center of the country with these protests, it was just the straw that broke the camel's back. We need to keep praying though. I think that the civilian part of this government is great. Actually, the Minister of Justice who made a lot of these changes used to demonstrate on the streets of DC with me for Darfur. We see that happening, and yet, the military we have to watch out for. I'm hoping that, as the transition takes place, we can see an end to this dual kind of reign and have a complete civilian government. Also, they need to watch out for some of the radical imams who are not happy with these changes. I heard about one who self-exiled to Turkey and I thought, "well, he is in the right place now."

Perkins: It is far from stable. When I was in Sudan earlier this year, in fact, about a week after I left there was an attempt on the life the Prime Minister whom we had been with because there are some who are not happy about this. But Faith, before we run out of time in this segment, from a standpoint of the church in America (Christians, believers, our listeners), what should they be doing right now, not only as it pertains to Sudan but other places around the world where believers are being persecuted?

McDonnell: Definitely pray. Get to know as much as they can. Another place where we really need the body of Christ to stand up for their brothers and sisters is Nigeria. The Christians in Nigeria are under what is really a genocidal attack. People need to learn more. They need to pray. They need to speak out. We're really pushing because there are some narratives that say that the problem in Nigeria is just a clash between herdsmen farmers, though this is a deliberate attack on the Christians. Also, [people should] help support as much as they can. In Sudan, we have precious people in the Nuba mountains who, for years, had to hide in caves from the bombings that were going on. Now that that is not happening, they can get back to life. But it would be great to have some support, especially when this virus pandemic is going on.

Perkins: Faith, thank you so much.