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MUSLIMS IN AFRICA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Religious Freedom Violations against Muslims in Africa

Islam plays a significant role in Africa's past and present. Its presence in the region dates to the seventh century, and today at least 500 million Muslims live in Africa. For more than a millennium, Islamic ideas, texts, and clerics have shaped political and social institutions across the continent.

The landscape of Muslim practices and traditions across Africa is diverse, complex, and fluid. While many Muslims in Africa practice their faith in peace and community, across the region some Muslims have been denied their right to freedom of religion or belief. Violators include governments in both Muslim- and Christian-majority countries, as well as nonstate actors.

This factsheet documents select incidents and trends in religious freedom violations against Muslims in African countries during the last two years. It provides illustrative examples of state persecution of Muslim minorities in Nigeria, Egypt, Algeria; attacks on Muslim leaders and houses of worship; and targeting of Muslims in the context of political conflict. Through a victim-centered lens, this factsheet highlights examples of Muslims of diverse backgrounds and traditions in Africa who have experienced infringements on their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

Recognizing the immense and diverse array of Muslim communities and individuals across the region, this factsheet provides a small sampling of the types of violations taking place against some Muslims on the continent. Many of these violations have taken place in countries that USCIRF recommends the State Department designate countries of particular concern (CPCs) or special watchlist (SWL) countries or in contexts home to nonstate actors the USCIRF has identified as warranting an entity of particular concern (EPC) designation.

Islam in Africa – An Historical Overview

Islam's presence in Africa began in the *seventh century* when the prophet Mohammad advised a number of his early disciples, who were facing persecution by the pre-Islamic inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, to seek refuge across the Red Sea in what is today Ethiopia. According to calculations based on CIA World Factbook data, at least 500 million Muslims currently live in Africa, comprising more than 45 percent of the continent's population. African nations make up 26 of the *Organization for Islamic Cooperation's* 57 member states, and at least *12 African countries* have established a mix of common law and Islamic law.

Islamic traditions and schools of thoughts practiced in Africa are immensely diverse. The majority of African Muslims follow _Sunni Islamic jurisprudence_, with the Maliki school of thought prominent across much of north and west Africa, Shafi'i traditions dominant in the horn of Africa, and Hanafi and Shafi'i practices prominent in Egypt. Africa is also home to many non-Sunni Muslim minorities, including Shi'a, Ahmadiyya, and Ibadi Muslim communities. _Sufism_ plays a strong role in religious life and practice for many African Muslims—Sufi Muslims can be Sunni or Shi'a. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many African Muslims incorporate beliefs and practices from other traditional religions into their spiritual lives. Trends of _international influence_ have also shaped recent Muslim beliefs and practices in Africa, including influential Muslim practices from communities in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan.

State Persecution of Muslim Minorities in Africa

In recent years, there have been examples of official discrimination against Muslim minorities in law and in practice in a range of countries across Africa, including against Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslim communities and against individuals who express beliefs in line with Qu'ranist, Tijaniyya, and Qadiriyya schools of thought.

Shi'a Persecution

The Egyptian government, which regulates religious practice, _refuses to recognize_ Shi'a Islam as an acceptable form of religious practice; Shi'a Muslims in Egypt are therefore not allowed to establish public or separate places of worship. Egyptian authorities have _accused_ several Shi'a Muslims of blasphemy or have prosecuted them for owning Shi'a books and texts in recent years, and some Shi'a Muslims report they are excluded from service in the national security forces due to their religious beliefs. In _February 2020_, an administrative court ordered all Shi'a websites and television channels closed, and in June of the same year, authorities _sentenced two Shi'a Muslims_ to one year in prison for insulting the "heavenly religions" by promoting Shi'a Islam.

In Nigeria, Shi'a minorities _face government discrimination_ in some northern states, with many Shi'a Muslims avoiding state-sanctioned Shari'a courts for fear of discrimination based on their Shi'a identity. In 2019, federal forces _violently cracked down_ on Shi'a protestors affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a response which drew condemnation from several religious leaders in Nigeria, including the _Archbishop of Abuja_.

The Comoros government has also discriminated against Shi'a Muslims. The constitution of Comoros defines the national identity as Sunni Muslim and prohibits the performance of non-Sunni religious rituals in public places. In August 2020, state authorities _arrested 11 Shi'a Muslims_ for commemorating the holiday of Ashura in public in accordance with Shi'a tradition.

Ahmadiyya Persecution

In 2020, Algerian authorities reignited a campaign against Ahmadis, harassing members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and charging Ahmadis with blasphemy and with gathering without a permit, even though the government has refused to grant the community a permit. Similarly, the Egyptian government has denied Ahmadis the right to establish public places of worship, banned Ahmadi books, and prosecuted Ahmadis for practicing their faith.

By contrast, other African states have remained neutral on Ahmadis' positions within broader Muslim traditions and demonstrated support to Ahmadiyya Muslim citizens. For example, in The Gambia, in the wake of the country's independent Supreme Islamic Council _declaring_ its view that Ahmadis are not Muslim, the Gambian Minister of Information and Communications spoke at the Second Annual Ahmadiyya Peace Conference to recognize the community's efforts in _"standing by the people and government of The Gambia."_

Repression of Other Muslim Minorities

The Egyptian government represses members of the Qur'anist school of thought that regards the Qur'an as the only valid religious source for Islam. Egyptian authorities have restricted Qur'anists' ability to express their beliefs. In 2020, authorities arrested _Qur'anist Reda Abdel Rahman_, a teacher at al-Azhar Institute in Sharqiya governorate, for promoting Qur'anist teachings. As of August 2021, he remained in detention.

In Nigeria, local government authorities have repressed and restricted individuals practicing Tijaniyya and Qandiriyya traditions, which were shaped by prominent 18th-century Muslim thinkers Ahmad al-Tijani (from Algeria) and Abdul Qadir Gilani (from Iran), respectively. In 2020, a Shari'a court in Kano state sentenced _Yahaya Sharif-Aminu_, a Tijaniyya-practicing Nigerian youth, to death for insulting the prophet Muhammad. Sharif-Aminu _allegedly_ "praised an imam from the [Tijaniyya] Muslim brotherhood (Ibrahim Niasse) to the extent it elevated him above the Prophet Muhammed" in a private WhatsApp

message. The same court sentenced _Abdulazeez Inyass_ to death for a similar charge in 2016. As of August 2021, both men remain in detention, although Sharif-Aminu's case is set to be retried. In 2021, Kano state officials banned Qandiriyya preacher _Sheikh Abduljabbar_ from preaching in the state for allegedly inciting violence and insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

The Algerian government represses and persecutes Muslim minority groups it perceives as _"foreign influencers,"_ in addition to Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Authorities arrested Mozabite Ibadi Muslim human rights activist _Kamel Eddine Fekhar_ several times for criticizing the government's treatment of ethno-religious minorities. Fekhar died in captivity in 2019, and his grave was desecrated by unknown vandals later that year.

In Guinea, the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs monitors sermons and issues guidance on weekly themes for inclusion in Friday sermons at mosques. In 2020, police detained Imam Nanfo Ismael Diaby, along with 10 of his followers, for continuing to _lead prayers in a local indigenous language_ against government regulation. Although the governor of Kankan state intervened and secured Diaby's release, youths took the opportunity of his absence to vandalize his mosque and his home.

Attacks on Muslim Leaders and Holy Sites

State actors are not the only perpetrators of religious freedom violations against Muslims in Africa. Across the region, there have been examples of militant Islamist groups and other nonstate assailants attacking Muslims based on their beliefs, including by targeting mosques, Muslim ceremonies, and Muslim leaders.

In the Lake Chad Basin, militant Islamist groups like _Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province_ have attacked mosques and Muslim individuals who disagree with their beliefs. In May 2020, Islamist extremists stormed a village in northeast Nigeria as people were _preparing to break their Ramadan fast_, killing at least 20 people. In July 2020, reported jihadist elements _attacked_ the city of Maiduguri as locals were preparing celebrations of the Muslim festival Eid al-Aldha, killing four people and wounding three others. In August 2020, jihadists killed 14 people in an attack in Cameroon that _targeted community leaders_ in their homes and at prayer at a mosque. The local chiefs had reportedly invoked the Qur'an at a town hall meeting to discourage villagers from aiding jihadist fighters.

Similar attacks have taken place in the _central Sahel_ region of west Africa. In 2019, in Burkina Faso, gunmen _killed at least 15_ people in an attack on the Grand Mosque in the village of Salmossi during Friday prayers. In 2021, suspected jihadists on motorbikes _attacked a mosque_ in Niger where worshippers were praying during Ramadan, killing 19 people.

Armed actors have also conducted attacks in east Africa. In September 2020, in Somalia, a suicide bomber _attacked a mosque_ in the southern port city of Kismayo as Friday prayers ended, killing two people. In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, a local Muslim leader was _gunned down_ in May 2021 during evening prayers at a mosque.

Meanwhile in southern Africa armed actors have also attacked mosques and other Muslim holy sites. In Mozambique, militant Islamists have _disrupted prayers at mosques_ and _threatened the lives of some local Islamic Sheiks_ with whom they disagree on precepts of Islam. In _September 2019,_ protestors broke into a mosque in Johannesburg, burning a parked car and some artwork. That same month a man threw a Molotov cocktail at a mosque while worshippers were inside. In October 2019, vandals desecrated 80 Muslim graves in Cape Town and rearranged the headstones in the shape of a cross.

Sectarian and Political Violence against Muslims

In several countries, governments and nonstate actors have targeted Muslims in the context of ongoing political violence or social unrest. Often assailants target these communities because of their perceived affiliation with a particular side of the conflict due to their Muslim identity. In Mozambique, the government has indiscriminately targeted Muslims based on their religious identity while fighting an insurgency in its majority-Muslim northern Cabo Delgado Province. According to _NGO reports and media reports_, in 2020 police arbitrarily arrested many individuals because they appeared to be Muslim from their clothing or facial hair. Policy analysis suggests _similar targeting_ of Muslims based on appearance and ethno-religious identity has taken place in Kenya, where the government has prioritized efforts to repel al-Shabaab insurgents from neighboring Somalia.

Religious targeting, including attacks on Muslims, has been a prominent feature of the civil war in Central African Republic, which erupted in 2012. During the most recent spate of violence in 2021, rebel forces _attacked a mosque_, killing 14 worshippers as they attempted to

target political rivals. The Central African forces have also targeted Muslims; in May national security forces reportedly *arrested and tortured* civilians from a local Muslim community, including five women, based on their perceived association with a predominantly Muslim rebel group in the area.

In Cameroon, alleged separatist fighters reportedly *set a mosque on fire* in Wum province in May 2019; the attack followed rumors that some Muslims had acted as informants on separatists to security forces. In 2019, in Ethiopia, attackers *burned down four mosques* in Amhara Region, during an outbreak of violence in which Muslim-owned businesses were also targeted, according to media reports.

Conclusion

All Africans have the right to freedom of religion or belief as protected under international law and by the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*. Despite this, there are examples throughout the continent of restrictions and violations limiting Muslims' freedom to express their beliefs and practice their faith. Some Muslims face violent attacks on their persons and their houses of worship and religious ceremonies, as well as restrictions on their ability to worship, assemble, and express their religious beliefs. These abuses are perpetrated by both governments and nonstate actors and affect Muslims who follow a wide range of Muslim practices and beliefs.

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