



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: NIGERIA

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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 Conditions in Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria continues to experience systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The government uses blasphemy laws to prosecute and imprison individuals perceived to have insulted religion, including Christians, Muslims, and humanists. It also continues to tolerate egregious violence by nonstate actors, including JAS/Boko Haram,¹ the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and other extremist groups. This violence affects large numbers of Christians and Muslims in several states across Nigeria and targets both religious sites and individuals from religious minority communities.

The May 2023 presidential election of Muslim candidate Bola Tinubu, along with Vice President and fellow Muslim candidate Kashim Shettima Mustapha, had the potential to exacerbate religious conflict in a country where Christians and Muslims each comprise about half of the population, respectively. President Tinubu's decision to select Christian Godswill Akpabio as Senate president was *likely* an effort to balance religious representation, especially given that the Nigerian House of Representatives leader-elect is a Sunni *Muslim*. There has, however, been no evidence that President Tinubu's efforts to balance leadership positions have effectively brought the country together. President Tinubu's wife Remi, an ordained Christian minister, *received* death threats from an extremist Muslim cleric in March 2024 based on her faith. The continuation of violent attacks against religious groups since the end of the Buhari government (2015–2023) also suggests that the religious composition of the government and its policies have not greatly mitigated interreligious conflict in the country.

This country update addresses the government's use of blasphemy laws and Shari'a codes in several states. The report also examines the role of violent nonstate actors in restricting religious freedom in Nigeria and explains how the government has responded to the violence.

¹ Known officially as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna lid-Dawah wa'al-Jihad (the Sunni Muslim Group for Dawah and Jihad).



Blasphemy Laws and Shari'a Codes

Nigeria's 1999 constitution states that the federal and state governments cannot adopt an official religion. At the same time, the constitution permits the use of Shari'a and traditional law courts for noncriminal proceedings at the state level but does not compel all citizens to abide by them. Currently, 12 states in northern Nigeria, along with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), have [implemented](#) Shari'a legal frameworks and some are applying Shari'a in criminal cases. Shari'a codes prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on Islamic law as interpreted by each state's high court. Shari'a courts utilize a religiously grounded penal code, including for serious criminal offenses, and specify punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning.

The Nigerian government continues to imprison individuals accused of blasphemy and often fails to pursue perpetrators of violence related to blasphemy allegations. The penal code criminalizes actions or statements "persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult." Authorities arrested humanist [Mubarak Bala](#) in 2020 on blasphemy charges over a Facebook post considered insulting to Islam. In 2022, the Kano State High Court sentenced him to 24 years in prison. In February 2024, the Kano State Court of Appeal granted Bala's appeal, and in May the court [reduced](#) his standing sentence to five years. Sufi Muslim [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) has remained imprisoned since 2022 for sharing audio messages deemed "insulting to the religious creed." In May 2024, United Nations experts [demanded](#) his release, citing deep concern that he could

be sentenced to death. Authorities arrested Sufi [Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#) for blasphemy in 2021 and sentenced him to death in 2022. He [dismissed](#) his attorney in 2024 and remains in prison. The government arrested Muslim [Isma'ila Sani Isah](#) on blasphemy charges in 2021 and he remains in prison as well. Sufi cleric [Abdulazeez Inyass](#), arrested in 2015 on blasphemy charges, remains in prison and is facing a death sentence. Authorities released Christian [Rhoda Jatau](#) from prison on bail in December 2023 but she still faces charges of "inciting public disturbance" and "exciting contempt of religious creed" after her arrest in May 2022.

Violent Nonstate Actors

Nigeria's government at both the federal and state level continues to tolerate attacks by nonstate actors who [justify](#) their violence on religious grounds. Islamist and some Fulani militant groups have [expressed](#) a goal of overthrowing secular governance with the intention of enforcing a singular interpretation of Islam.

Fulani Armed Groups

Approximately [30,000](#) Fulani bandits operate in several groups in northwest Nigeria, with groups [consisting](#) of anywhere from 10 to 1,000 members. These groups engage in violence and banditry targeting predominantly Christian communities in Nigeria and generally pose the [greatest security](#) threat in northwest Nigeria. This activity [includes](#) kidnapping, [rape](#), property and cattle theft, illegal possession of weapons, and murder. The specific perpetrators of and motivation behind individual attacks can be difficult to verify. Regardless of motivation,

however, attacks in the northwest, northeast, and central regions of Nigeria significantly restrict freedom of religion or belief, particularly for the predominantly Christian communities that live there.

Fulani-associated banditry, which has been occurring for years, has evolved into a transnational security [dilemma](#). The conflict is magnified by competition for natural resources between often-Christian farmers and often-Muslim Fulani animal herders. In 2024, the conflict drastically affected food production and regional trade and [fomented](#) illegal bandit-enforced taxation campaigns that victimized primarily Christian farmers.

Violence between herders (mostly Muslims) and farmers (predominantly Christian) sometimes results in the destruction of religious sites, even when nonreligious factors like resource competition and ethnic animosity are the drivers of conflict. This competition often [manifests](#) along religious divides between Christians and Muslims, particularly in areas like Plateau State where both communities reside. In January 2024, skirmishes between Fulanis and ethnic Mwangaful farmers [killed](#) at least 30 people in Plateau State, and assailants also burned churches and mosques.

Fulani bandits also carry out kidnappings to extort ransom money from middle- or working-class families. In several cases, they have kidnapped students from Christian schools or from [buses](#) taking children to these schools. Gangs generally release hostages unharmed if families meet ransom demands. Victims' families have [criticized](#) the government for being slow in responding to and rescuing kidnapping victims. They also criticize the government's failure to prevent such kidnappings. Nigeria's president has [requested](#) victims' families not pay ransom demands to discourage further crimes. President Tinubu has also promised the government will [utilize](#) more "detailed strategies" in response to the kidnappings, without elaborating what those strategies would entail.

In March 2024, bandits conducted several attacks in Kaduna State, where similar groups have [targeted](#) Catholics in the past. On March 7, bandits [carried](#) off 287 school students between the ages of seven to 15 in Kuriga, an event a Catholic bishop [attributed](#) to a lack of transparency and corruption in the government. They also [abducted](#) 102 persons in two separate attacks in Kajuru Station and Dogon Noma on March 16 and 17, respectively. Finally, bandits [attacked](#) Muslims performing Friday prayer at the Juma'at mosque in Anguwar Makera, killing two worshipers and abducting others.

In April 2024 in Zamfara State, bandits [abducted](#) several Muslim worshipers from a mosque while they were observing nighttime (*tahajjud*) prayers. That same month, bandits in Jos State [killed](#) 29 Christians in the villages of Kopnanle, Mandung, and Bokkos Town and in the Mbar district of Bokkos. That same month, assailants [killed](#) 25 people and injured many more in Kogi State, where Christian farmers often clash with Fulani Muslim herders and where church attacks have [killed](#) Christians in the past, prompting the governor to assure the public that police would pursue the perpetrators. In April in Kaduna State, bandits reportedly [killed](#) Evangelical Pastor Manasseh Ibrahim along the Birnin Gwari-Kaduna highway. In June in Sokoto State, bandits [kidnapped](#) a traditional religious leader (*madakin*) of the Shabu community in Nasarawa State.

Islamist Insurgents

Several Islamist insurgent groups are active in Nigeria, two of which are categorized by the U.S. Department of State as Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) for perpetrating particularly severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The first, ISWAP, originated in northeastern Nigeria and [split](#) into two factions in 2016 from what was then called Boko Haram (a shorthand phrase for "Western education is sinful"). JAS/Boko Haram is composed of the remaining Boko Haram members.

Boko Haram formed in 2002 and was one of the first extant insurgent groups in Africa. In Nigeria, it gained notoriety for attacks on civilians, especially Christians in Borno State, and for the kidnapping of Chibok girls. ISWAP's current operational doctrine, in contrast, generally [spares](#) Muslim civilians.

In early January 2024, suspected JAS/Boko Haram insurgents reportedly [killed](#) 14 people in Yobe State, including the local Church of Christ in Nigeria [pastor](#). In March, suspected JAS/Boko Haram insurgents [abducted](#) several hundred hostages, mostly women and children, in Borno State near an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp hosting many [Christians](#). The government has [closed](#) most camps in the area, putting further pressure on these Christian communities. Borno residents have experienced highly visible religiously based attacks in the past, including the 2014 Boko Haram kidnappings at a Chibok school. Christian [Leah Sharibu](#) currently remains a prisoner of ISWAP at age [21](#), six years after her 2018 [abduction](#) from a girls' school in Dapchi, in

Yobe State. In May 2024, local Christians in Kaduna State [protested](#) the government for failing to obtain her freedom. In June, suspected JAS/Boko Haram insurgents [killed](#) 18 people and wounded 42 in Borno State, with female suicide bombers targeting a wedding ceremony and separate attackers targeting the funeral for those killed in the wedding blast.

In 2022, ISWAP began to expand operations to the southern states to secure natural resources such as oil and exploit the greater relative wealth of citizens there, including a majority-Christian population. The reduction in attacks in late 2023 into 2024, however, suggest ISWAP is strategically [countering](#) its main [rival](#), JAS/Boko Haram, and Nigerian government forces in the north or possibly waiting to resupply its units with arms and fighters in the south. In June 2024 in Borno State, ISWAP gunmen reportedly [executed](#) three Christians kidnapped by the group, recorded the event, and subsequently broadcasted it on their media site.

A third smaller group is the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru, which also competes for power in Nigeria. In May 2024, Ansaru gunmen reportedly [kidnapped](#) 160 mainly Christian children and killed eight people in a village in Niger State.

Government Counterinsurgency Campaign

The Nigerian military continues to combat Islamist groups such as ISWAP and JAS/Boko Haram. It also has [considered](#) using counterinsurgency tactics and weapons against Fulani armed groups. The government generally utilizes both the military and special federal police units for counterinsurgency. Since February 2024, government forces killed bandit leaders in northwest Nigeria, including Boderi Isyaku, who was responsible for the

2021 kidnappings at [Greenfield](#) University in Kaduna and the Federal Government College in Yauri, Kebbi.

These operations, however, have resulted in abuses committed by the Nigerian government. In March, the National Human Rights Commission [announced](#) the conclusion of a February 2023 probe concerning a military-led forced abortion program. A 2022 Reuters investigation found that since 2013, in a shocking violation of human rights, the army has forcibly [terminated](#) the pregnancies of thousands of women and girls whom Islamist insurgents raped in northeast Nigeria. The Commission did not reveal the findings of its probe or indicate if the findings would be made public. In April, an army unit [fired](#) on Christian students protesting Fulani armed group attacks on Christian villages in Plateau State. The army stated it was an unintended response to violent protests at a military checkpoint.

The Nigerian government has taken some steps to ensure greater accountability for how it carries out its campaign to reduce violence against religious communities. In February 2024, an independent investigation [revealed](#) Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) officials are likely guilty of corruption and taking payoffs for permitting the entry and transfer of heavily regulated motorcycles into the country. Criminal gangs, Islamist insurgents, and Fulani armed groups all use motorcycles as tools of choice in attacking Christians and Muslims, particularly in northern Nigeria. In May, a military court [ordered](#) two army officers to stand for court martial proceedings for the deaths of 85 Muslim civilians [killed](#) during a December 2023 drone strike at a religious celebration in Kaduna State.



Conclusion

Nigeria's government continues to impose systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief through blasphemy laws and other Shari'a-based provisions. Several individuals remain incarcerated with long prison sentences, having all received blasphemy convictions.

On the other hand, there appears to be a willingness on the part of the Nigerian government, including state governors, to [discuss](#) the country's security situation more openly. Nigeria's government is becoming more active in pursuing violent nonstate actors who continue to attack or threaten religious communities. In spring 2024, the Nigerian government successfully [resolved](#) two major kidnapping events. In March, bandits [released](#) over 130 unharmed school students in Kaduna State. In May, army troops and police units rescued hundreds of JAS/Boko Haram-held women and children in the Sambisa forest in northeastern Nigeria. Most of the hostages were there for months or even years.

In its [2024 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommends the U.S. Department of State designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its government's engagement in and toleration of particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The report also outlines several steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Nigeria, including emphasizing the importance of religious freedom considerations in the provision of U.S. foreign assistance funds. This would not only advance FoRB in Nigeria by helping to create a more sustainable security situation but would also position Nigeria as a stronger bulwark against broader regional conflict affecting religious communities across the Lake Chad basin.

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