



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

June 2021

# NONBELIEVERS IN AFRICA

Anurima Bhargava  
*Chair*

Tony Perkins  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

James W. Carr  
Frederick A. Davie  
Nadine Maenza  
Nury Turkel

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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

### The Condition of Nonbelievers in Africa

*By Mohy Omer, Policy Analyst*

#### Introduction

The number of Africans who do not believe in or identify with any religion is *growing*. These individuals, and the organizations that have emerged in recent years to advocate for their rights and freedoms, face immense challenges, including government restrictions and societal discrimination.

This factsheet examines the condition of nonbelievers in Africa. It highlights the growing demographic of nonbelievers on the continent and discusses challenges members of this community face in seeking to live by their unbelief in religion or a deity. Finally, this factsheet provides specific examples of cases of discrimination against nonbelievers in several countries across the continent of Africa.

#### Nonbelievers and International Religious Freedom

The term “nonbeliever” *includes* those who identify as atheist, agnostic, freethinker, humanist, secularist, and those who do not identify with any religion. There are subtle yet meaningful distinctions across these categories.

<b>Agnostic</b>	A person who is unsure or undecided about the existence of a god
<b>Atheist/Nontheist</b>	A person who does not believe in the existence of a god
<b>Freethinker</b>	A person who formulates his/her own opinion rather than relying solely on preexisting religious interpretations and scripture
<b>Humanist</b>	A person whose moral beliefs and behavior are motivated by a sense of common humanity and universal human dignity

*Globally*, the number of religiously unaffiliated and nonbelieving people is *rising*, especially among Millennials (between the ages of 23 and 39) and Generation Z (below the age of 22). As of 2010, 1.1 billion people globally *identified* as religiously unaffiliated or nonbeliever.

Article 18 of both the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) protect not only the right to believe in and practice a religion and to change religion, but also the right to [hold nontheistic beliefs](#). Under these international instruments, nonbelievers have the right to hold, follow, advocate, and promote their world view to the same extent as theists. Parties to these international agreements are expected to uphold their obligations by protecting the rights of all their citizens to choose and practice their beliefs freely, openly, and without any harassment or fear.

## Demographics of Nonbelievers in Africa

Systematically measuring the number of Africans who identify as nonbelievers is difficult due to a lack of reliable information. However, a 2010 Pew Research Center report indicated that [3](#) percent of the Sub-Saharan African population were religiously unaffiliated. This figure increased to [3.2](#) percent in 2020. This same source projects that the number of the religiously unaffiliated will double, to [6.4](#) percent, on the continent by 2040. The data also indicates the same trend in North Africa, though it is difficult to quantify due to lack of reliable data. These estimates include various types of nonbelievers and vary by country. For example, the Kenyan government reported [1.6](#) percent of its citizens as atheists in its 2019 population census, though the [Atheists in Kenya Society](#) (AKS) claimed that at least 3.2 percent of Kenyans were atheists. Similarly, [4.2](#) percent of Ghanaians, [8.1](#) percent of Ivorians, [17.9](#) percent of Mozambicans, and [14.9](#) percent of South Africans were reported not to have a religious affiliation. Additionally, about [1](#) percent of Sudanese and [1](#) percent of Egyptians were mentioned as nonbelievers.

## Nonbeliever Organizations in Africa

Due to the paucity of legal protections, political isolation, and social intolerance in many African societies, the ability of African nonbelievers to organize to advocate for their rights is severely limited. Throughout the continent, these groups also face widespread challenges to publicly share their views. These [challenges](#) include legal barriers, organizational limitations, financial shortages, and social stigmas associated with being a nontheist. Despite these obstacles, a few online and offline organizations have emerged recently to advocate for freedom of belief and thought for the African nonbeliever community. For example, in 2018, Nigerian nonbelievers [registered](#) three secular organizations to advocate for their views. These newly founded organizations include the Northern

Nigerian Humanist Association and the Nigerian Secular Society. Similarly, the [Africa Atheism Website](#) was established in 2015 to provide a safe online space for African nonbelievers on the continent in the diaspora to express their views freely on issues related to freedom of belief and thought as well as discuss the challenges they face in their societies and communities.

## Religious Freedom Violations Aimed at Nonbelievers in Africa

Nonbelievers in Africa, as well as nongovernmental organizations and individual activists advocating for the rights of nonbelievers on the continent, face [immense](#) political, cultural, religious, and social pressure.

### 1. Arrests, Detention, and Imprisonment of Nonbelievers

In recent years, nonbelievers have faced arrest, detention, and imprisonment for holding or advocating for their rights to hold nontheistic beliefs.

- In February 2021, Said Djabelkhir, the founder of the [Cercle des Lumières pour la pensée libre](#) (Circle of Enlightenment for Free Thought), appeared at a court hearing in Algiers, Algeria, after a fellow academic filed a [complaint](#) that Mr. Djabelkhir's writings about and critiques of Islamic rituals and practices represented attacks on Islam, particularly mocking the prophet Mohammed. The Court found Mr. Djabelkhir guilty of "offending the precepts of Islam" under Article 144 of the Penal Code and charged him with three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 Dinars (approximately US\$375.) According to his lawyer, Mr. Djabelkhir was released on bail and is awaiting an appeal.
- In April 2020, [Mubarak Bala](#), the president of the [Nigerian Humanist Association](#), was arrested by Nigerian authorities and has been held without charge ever since. Mr. Bala's arrest [followed](#) his Facebook post which read: "the fact is, you have no life after this one. You have been dead before, long before you were born, billions of years of death." In addition, a petition by lawyers in Kano state accused Mr. Bala of posting things that were "insulting to Muslims." Since his arrest, authorities have significantly restricted Mr. Bala's access to his lawyer and [for months](#) refused to confirm his whereabouts and wellbeing. In a recent interview, his wife Amina Ahmed stated that her husband might already have been [charged](#) and that authorities are refusing to share information about the charges or which court of law issued them. In December, after many delays, a federal court in Abuja [ruled](#) Mr. Bala's detention unconstitutional and order

he be released, yet Kano authorities continue to hold him in detention. Mubarak Bala publicly declared his atheism in 2014 and became an outspoken advocate for Nigerian nonbelievers' rights.

- In August 2019, Egyptian authorities arrested social media activist Anas Hasan, who managed the Egyptian Atheist Facebook Page, under Egypt's relatively new cybersecurity law, for promotion of atheism on Facebook from his home in Alexandria. He was tried and sentenced to three years in prison and fined 300,00 EGP (approximately US\$20) in February 2020.
- In May 2017, Sudanese authorities arrested Mohamed Salih when he requested to change the religious *status* on his national identification card from Muslim to non-religious. The judge *declared* him mentally "disturbed" and "unfit" to stand trial. Prior to the Sudanese *revolution* in April 2019, the government applied a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Apostasy and blasphemy *laws* severely punished conversion from Islam to any other faith or nonbelief. Although Sudan has *repealed* or amended these laws, the country continues to face *challenges* to ensuring full religious freedom.

## 2. Inadequate Government Efforts to Protect Nonbelievers from Targeting and Social Stigma.

- In its 2019 annual *report*, Humanists International stated that two leaders in Uganda of the Humanist Association for Leadership Equality and Accountability (HALEA) were physically attacked and their offices were vandalized for promoting freedom of thought and belief. No one has been arrested for this crime.
- In 2018, when activist Mohammed Nofal was invited to speak about atheism on a *live* TV program in Cairo, Egypt, he was declared mentally ill by the program's host. "How could you be mentally stable and not believe in a Creator?," the host shouted at him. Shortly, after explaining why he did not believe in a god or religion, the host asked him to *leave* the studio before the end of the program. Following the broadcast, Mohamed Nofal and his family received multiple death threats. The Egyptian government took no action to protect Mr. Nofal. Out of concern for his family's safety, he fled Egypt for Germany where he currently resides with his family and continues to advocate for greater space for nonbelievers in Egypt.

- In 2020, the Tanzanian government failed to protect activist and founder of Faithless Hijabis, Zara Kay, when she was *accused* of advocating for apostasy and blasphemy in Dar es-Salaam city. Ms. Kay was declared an apostate by members of her community and received death threats. When the case was reported to authorities, the government did not take measures to protect Ms. Kay. According to *reports*, discrimination against nonbelievers is on the rise.

## 3. Discrimination in Schools and Employment

- Discrimination in Schools:
  - In South Africa, some schools require all students, including nonbelievers, to partake in religious teaching, abide by religious rules, and participate in rituals against their will, *violating* their rights not to participate in such activities.
  - In Uganda, public schools are required by law to *teach* Islam or Christianity or both religions at the primary level. Nonbelieving students do not have the choice to opt out of these religious teachings.
  - In Egypt, public school curricula *require* students to take either Muslim or Christian courses. Nonbelieving students and other religious minorities such as Baha'is cannot opt out of these two religion courses.
  - In Sudan, the law *instructs* teaching of Muslim courses in public schools from pre-school through the first and second year of university. Non-Muslim students are required to take courses on Islam to be qualified for graduation, or to attend private schools.
- Employment discrimination
  - In Kenya, Harrison Mumai, the President of the Atheists in Kenya Society (AKS), *said* "my public atheism made it more difficult for me to secure employment," after he was fired from the Kenyan Central Bank. Mr. Mumai has interviewed for more than 200 jobs and stated that many employers made it clear to him that they were worried about his outspoken atheism impacting their businesses.



- In Somalia, a university professor, Mahmoud Jama Ahmed, was accused of *blasphemy* in 2019 when he suggested in a Facebook post that praying might not be the best strategy to address Somalia's drought issue. After receiving multiple death threats, he was arrested by the authorities and sentenced to two and a half years in jail in April 2019. A few months later, the President of Somalia pardoned Professor Ahmed and he was freed, although the university suspended him.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As just described, nonbelievers in Africa, and activists and organizations advocating on their behalf, face immense challenges in expressing their views and living out their beliefs. They face egregious discrimination in schools and employment, including in the public and private sectors. Furthermore, governments cited in this factsheet fail to protect nonbelievers from societal harassment and threats. Members of the nonbelieving community continue to live in constant fear due to lack of adequate government protection.

## Professional Staff

---

**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Senior Communications Specialist*

**Dwight Bashir**  
*Director of Outreach and Policy*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Director of Research and Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Patrick Greenwalt**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Gabrielle Hasenstab**  
*Communications Specialist*

**Roy Haskins**  
*Director of Finance and Operations*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Director of Human Resources*

**Kirsten Lavery**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**John Lechner**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Niala Mohammad**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Jason Morton**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Mohyeldin Omer**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Senior Congressional Relations Specialist*

**Zack Udin**  
*Researcher*

**Nina Ullom**  
*Congressional Relations Specialist*

**Madeline Velturo**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.