



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# ISSUE UPDATE: KANO STATE

October 2021

Nadine Maenza  
*Chair*

Nury Turkel  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Khizr Khan

Sharon Kleinbaum

Tony Perkins

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.*

## Religious Freedom Violations in Kano State, Nigeria

*By Madeline Velturo, Policy Analyst, USCIRF*

### Summary

Authorities in Kano state, Nigeria, have perpetrated some of the most egregious religious freedom violations in the country. In recent years, including in 2021, Kano authorities have arrested, charged, and/or convicted several individuals for blasphemy, prohibited broadcast stations from airing religious content, restricted religious poets and performers, and arrested and detained individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community based on its official interpretation and enforcement of Islamic law, or Shari'a. This issue update catalogues recent religious freedom violations committed by Kano state authorities in northern Nigeria.

### Context

Kano is Nigeria's most populous state, located in the country's northern region. The state government [reports](#) a population of 20 million people, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslim. The Emir of Kano is one of the most highly respected Muslim leaders in Nigeria. Kano is one of 12 states in Nigeria that have adopted Shari'a criminal codes that operate in parallel with secular courts in accordance with provisions of Nigeria's 1999 constitution.

Kano's Shari'a code [criminalizes](#) blasphemy, sodomy, and other offenses on the basis of government interpretations of Islam. [Penalties](#) for such religion-related offenses include extended prison sentences, public lashings, amputation, and death by hanging or stoning. Kano's Shari'a code is managed by the Hisbah Committee and enforced by *hisbah* brigades, locally recruited youth who patrol neighborhoods. A [2019 USCIRF report](#) found that the Kano *hisbah's* responsibilities include arrest and detention despite the fact that those activities are outside its legal jurisdiction. The report also detailed allegations that Kano's *hisbah* treat Shi'a Muslim minorities harshly due to their religious beliefs.

Kano authorities took the expansion of Shari'a into criminal law as an opportunity to create and expand other statutory agencies drawing from Islamic traditions, including a Zakat Commission, a Censorship Board, and a Directorate of Social Reorientation. The Directorate aims to instill what it views as traditional Muslim values, while the Censorship Board reviews films and other media for their adherence to its interpretation of principles of morality.

## Recent Religious Freedom Violations by Kano Authorities

Kano authorities have charged and convicted several Nigerians of blasphemy in recent years. In 2016, a court sentenced [Abdulazeez Inyass](#) to death for blaspheming against Islam after a secret trial in Kano. Inyass allegedly said that Sheikh Ibrahim Niassa, the Senegalese cleric credited with reviving the Tijaniyya Islamic sect and spreading it across West Africa, “was bigger than Prophet Muhammad.” While the governor has not yet signed off on Inyass’ death sentence, Inyass has [remained detained](#) for five years.

In April 2020, officials in Kano collaborated with Kaduna state authorities to arrest the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, [Mubarak Bala](#), and transfer him to Kano state custody. Bala’s arrest followed a petition by a group of lawyers to the Kano State Police Commissioner to prosecute Bala for posting things on Facebook that are [“provocative and annoying to Muslims.”](#) Bala’s arrest is believed to be in relation to a Facebook post he posted that read, “Fact is, you have no life after this one. You have been dead before, long before you were born, billions of years of death.” For several months after his arrest, Kano authorities denied Bala access to his lawyer and [refused](#) to provide information on his whereabouts. In December, a federal court in Abuja found Bala’s detention unconstitutional and [ordered his release](#), but Kano authorities did not comply. In July 2021, Kano authorities [formally charged](#) Bala with ten counts of causing a public disturbance under customary law for posting “blasphemous” content on social media. Blasphemy is also criminalized under Nigeria’s customary law, with punishments of up to two years in prison.

In August 2020, a Kano court [sentenced](#) 22-year-old Muslim gospel singer [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) to death for [“insulting the religious creed”](#) in a series of private audio [messages circulated via WhatsApp](#). The messages are said to have praised an imam from the Tijaniyya Muslim brotherhood “to the extent it elevated him above the Prophet Muhammed.” The same court sentenced 16-year-old [Omar Farouq](#) to ten years in prison for “using foul language toward Allah” in an argument with a friend. Both trials took place in private, in violation of the Nigerian Constitution. In January, a higher Kano court [overturned both sentences](#), citing irregularities during the trial. Despite both cases exhibiting the same irregularities, the higher court only [dismissed the charges](#) against Farouq. The judge ordered Sharif-Aminu’s case to be [retried](#), and his whereabouts remain unknown.

In February 2021, the Kano government [banned Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#) from preaching in the state, accusing him of inciteful rhetoric and sermons. Authorities ordered the closure of Kabara’s mosque and affiliated religious schools pending an investigation. [In carrying out the order](#), heavily armed personnel from the Department of State Security (DSS) prevented his followers from protesting and prohibited the community from carrying out its annual *Mauqibi* religious festival. State authorities further directed all broadcast stations and social media platforms to abstain from airing religious discussions in the interest of peace and tranquility in the state.

In July 2021, authorities arrested Kabara and charged him with blasphemy and incitement. Charges reportedly related to his [“defamatory sermons”](#) that are [“mortifying \[to\] the companions and the Holy Prophet Muhammad.”](#) The arrest followed a debate [organized by the government](#) where Kabara debated precepts of Islam with state-backed clerics. A religious advocacy group that typically advocates for the Shi’a Muslim community [called for](#) the government to drop the charges and to release Kabara.

In June 2021, the DSS [arrested Ahmad Abdul](#) for allegedly insulting Allah in a song he released that was not vetted by the Kano Censorship Board. The chair of the Board, Ismaili Muhammad Na’abba, had recently announced a [new policy](#) that poets and singers would not be allowed to perform in the state without obtaining a license, and that they would be required to submit their material to the Board for approval. Na’abba said the Board was established to ensure that everyone would respect the religion and culture of their fellow man, and insinuated the decree meant to eliminate the abuse and intrusion of God, his Prophet, and his servants in music and poetry.

In July 2021, Kano’s Hisbah Board [arrested and charged five men](#) suspected of engaging in LGBTI activity. Kano’s Shari’a code [criminalizes “sodomy,”](#) which it defines as “carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man or woman through (the) rectum.” Individuals convicted of sodomy may be sentenced to caning of 100 lashes and one year in prison if unmarried, or with stoning to death (*rajm*) if married or previously married. A [2021 USCIRF factsheet](#) found that imposing the death penalty for sodomy and other related offenses under interpretations of Shari’a law violates freedom of religion or belief for LGBTI persons. The report concluded that “individuals have the right to hold and follow diverse views on religious precepts, including regarding sexuality, without government interference and violence.”

## Conclusion

Authorities in Kano state, Nigeria, have been responsible for some of the most egregious violations of religious freedom in the country. In 2020 and 2021 alone, government officials in Kano have arrested, charged, and/or convicted several individuals of blasphemy for disagreeing with the state’s interpretation of Islamic precepts, restricted musicians and broadcast stations from disseminating religious content, and conducted other arrests under Islamic law that violate Nigerians’ freedom of religion or belief.

USCIRF recommended in its [2021 Annual Report](#) that the State Department designate Nigeria a country of particular concern, or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of international religious freedom. For information on religious freedom conditions in Nigeria countrywide and USCIRF’s recommendations for U.S. policy, see USCIRF’s [2021 Annual Report](#).



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

---

**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Supervisory Public Affairs Officer*

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

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**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*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**  
*Victims List and Outreach Specialist*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Supervisory Policy Adviser*

**Zack Udin**  
*Researcher*

**Nina Ullom**  
*Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist*

**Madeline Velluro**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*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.