

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained extremely poor. Violence across Nigeria impacted freedom of religion or belief as the government failed to prevent attacks against faith-based organizations or worshipers, with some accusing it of fomenting such attacks. Nigerian government officials were often slow to react to information about possible [attacks](#) or to respond after attacks occurred. In some cases, those impacted by violence directly criticized a lack of government accountability and called for further steps to protect religious freedom. Both the police and army drew criticism for not stemming the activities of violent insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), and Fulani gangs that often worked in collaboration with them.

Those states where violence was most prevalent include Borno, Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, Adamawa, and Benue. Additionally, multiple attacks during the year targeted religious leaders. For example, in January 2023, bandits [killed](#) Father Isaac Achi of the Minna Diocese, while others shot and injured assistant parish priest Father Collins Omeh at the Saints Peter and Paul Church in the Paikoro region. In May 2023, insurgents in Benue State [killed](#) pastor Dominic Dajo of St. Peter Catholic Church and his wife. In Nasarawa State, Fulani herders [killed](#) pastor Daniel Danbeki of the Evangelical Church Winning All, along with his wife and 41 others.

In Yobe State, Boko Haram insurgents [killed](#) at least 37 people in February 2023 and [killed](#) another 40 people in October. In May, the Nigerian army [rescued](#) two women Boko Haram had kidnapped in 2014 from a Chibok secondary school. In November, Boko Haram [killed](#) 15 farmers in the Muslim-majority Borno State and at least 10 [Christians](#) in Taraba State.

In 2023, the government detained individuals accused of blasphemy and often failed to hold accountable perpetrators of violence related to blasphemy allegations. The Nigerian penal code includes a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for acts "persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult." Twelve states in northern Nigeria have [implemented](#) Shari'a legal frameworks since 1999. In May, a Sokoto State magistrate [released](#) two suspects arrested for the May 2022 mob murder of Christian Deborah Samuel for alleged blasphemy, eliminating any accountability for her death. In June, a mob in Sokoto State stoned to death Usman Buda after he made a remark misunderstood as a slur against the Prophet Muhammad. At least five prisoners remain in state custody on blasphemy charges, including humanist [Mubarak Bala](#) and Sufi Muslim [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#). At a November 27 hearing in a Bauchi State high court, a judge rejected Christian [Rhoda Jatau's](#) appeal that the court dismiss the blasphemy charges against her; however, on December 10, a Bauchi court judge released her on bail.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Redesignate Boko Haram and ISWAP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
 - Appoint a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S. diplomatic efforts to address religious freedom violations and atrocity risk in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin; and
 - Diplomatically, financially, and administratively support Nigerian civil society organizations to coordinate a national dialogue on implementing United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) Resolution 16/18 and to promote religious freedom while safeguarding freedom of expression.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Revitalize the bipartisan caucus on Nigeria to place due focus on religious freedom and other related human rights challenges in addition to security and crimes against humanity and atrocity risk in Nigeria; and
 - Request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in achieving religious freedom objectives in the country.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Religious Freedom in the Sahel Region of Africa](#)
- **Factsheet:** [African Traditional and Indigenous Religions](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Ethnonationalism and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Abuses against Fulani Muslim Civilians](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S.-Nigeria policy must prioritize religious freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Nigeria](#)

Background

Nigeria is the most populous [country](#) in Africa, with around 231 million people. Approximately 46 percent of the population are Christian, and roughly 46 percent are Muslim. About eight percent of Nigerians practice African traditional religions. Other communities, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, make up less than one percent of the population.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the government from establishing an official religion. The constitution recognizes Shari'a courts for noncriminal proceedings, but state laws do not theoretically compel participation in them. Nigeria again saw historically reoccurring [electoral violence](#) during the February 2023 [election](#) of Bola Tinubu as national president.

Twelve northern states utilize Shari'a criminal and family codes alongside civil and customary laws. The 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 special penal code, including for serious criminal offenses, specifying punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning. In November, a Kano Shari'a court [sentenced](#) eight men to 10 lashes each and a fine for wearing women's attire at a wedding in violation of Islamic moral standards. Although Nigerian Shari'a penal codes do not criminalize [apostasy](#), converts can be at risk. In August, an 18-year-old Christian convert successfully secured a court order protecting her from members of her family who threatened to kill her for leaving Islam.

Violence Impacting Religious Freedom

The government, at both the federal and state levels, continued to tolerate egregious criminal activity and violence by armed groups that targeted religious communities and negatively impacted religious freedom. The specific perpetrators of and motivation behind individual attacks are often difficult to verify. Nigerian Christian leaders typically blame armed Fulani herders for attacks that are ethnoreligious in nature. It is also difficult to verify precise numbers of victims, with different sources providing varying estimates. For example, a report by the Nigerian nongovernmental organization Intersociety [claimed](#) that violent insurgent groups and armed gangs, along with Nigerian government forces, accounted for 8,222 Christian deaths across Nigeria in 2023. Another report asserted that in 2023, extremists in Benue State [killed](#) 414 people from predominantly Christian communities while injuring, raping, or kidnapping 100 more. Others reported that between May and June 2023, violent groups [killed](#) 450 Christians in three northeastern states.

In June, violent actors in Plateau State reportedly killed at least 29 people, including several Christians, and later in the month [killed](#) 19 villagers, including Christians in Jos South and Mangu. In September, bandits in Kaduna State attempted to kidnap a priest and then set fire to his home, [killing](#) Catholic seminarian Na'aman Danlami. In November, armed gunmen reportedly killed one person and [kidnapped](#) at least 150 people in Zamfara State for ransom. In Plateau State, assailants [attacked](#) Christian villages killing over 190 people the weekend before Christmas, including Baptist minister Solomon Gushe and his family. Intersociety [claimed](#) that the coordinated Christmas week massacre was so deadly because of collusion between armed groups and government officials.

Muslim leaders have [criticized](#) the Nigerian government for the lack of response to the violence. In January, a bomb blast [killed](#) at least 50 Islamic cattle herders in the north. The state has also at times issued policies broadly [targeting](#) innocent Fulani Muslims.

Threats against the nonreligious in Nigeria are common, and atheists [face](#) challenges, especially in the northern states. [Atheists](#) in Nigeria have been subject to attack, arrest, and murder for "blaspheming Islam." It is also reported that "life as a nonbeliever in Nigeria is also difficult for women, who already are severely underrepresented in government and other key sectors."

Counterinsurgency Campaign

In 2023, the Nigerian government, ISWAP, and Boko Haram [continued](#) to wage operations against one another in the Lake Chad region, resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. In July, ISWAP assailants [killed](#) 25 Muslim Fulani herders in Borno State. In November, over 60 people [died](#) during a Lake Chad battle between the insurgent groups. Also in November, ISWAP forces [killed](#) 17 people, including Christian farmers and herders in Yobe State after they refused to pay a tax. In December, a military drone meant to target insurgents [killed](#) 85 Muslims at a religious celebration in Kaduna State.

Traditional Religions

In Ilorin, ethnic Yorùbá organizers of the popular annual Isese festival [protested](#) against the harassment of traditional religion practitioners and government complicity by canceling the event. The International Council for Ifa Religion (ICIR) subsequently asserted that harassment of indigenous practices and the state's inaction were in violation of Nigeria's constitution. In July, ICIR [wrote](#) a letter to incoming President Tinubu protesting any consideration of an official state religion.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Nigeria maintained a strong bilateral relationship in 2023. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$911 million for aid programs in Nigeria. In February, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [traveled](#) to Abuja to discuss the country's upcoming presidential election. In August, Assistant Secretary Phee [visited](#) Nigeria to discuss U.S. support for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In December, she [met](#) with leaders in Abuja to address the ongoing political turmoil with regional leaders gathered for the ECOWAS Heads of State Summit.

In January 2023, members of Congress introduced [H.Res. 82](#) calling for the U.S. Department of State to designate Nigeria as a CPC and for President Joseph R. Biden to appoint a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, in line with USCIRF's recommendations. In June, several members of Congress [wrote](#) to the president of Nigeria advocating for the release of Mubarak Bala. As of December 31, 2023, the Senate had yet to [confirm](#) the Biden administration's nominee for ambassador to Nigeria, [Richard Mills, Jr.](#)

On December 29, 2023, the State Department designated Boko Haram and ISWAP as EPCs. However, it did not [designate](#) Nigeria as a CPC for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, despite [documentation](#) of such violations in its own reporting on the country.