

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor. Federal and state governments continued to tolerate attacks or fail to respond to violent actions by nonstate actors who justify their violence on religious grounds. These actors include Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Bandit groups also participated in attacks against religious communities as well. Violent Islamist groups and some Fulani militants sought to impose a singular interpretation of Islam on individuals and communities in their areas of operation, regardless of these individuals’ or communities’ own religion or belief. Security forces sometimes remained slow to respond to violence by these groups, resulting in injury or death for members of targeted religious minority communities. In January, suspected JAS insurgents killed 14 people in Yobe State, including the local pastor of the Church of Christ in Nigeria. In May, al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru gunmen reportedly kidnapped 160 mainly Christian children and killed eight people in Niger State but later released the abducted children. ISWAP assailants also reportedly executed three Christians and shared images of the executions on social media. In November, Lakurawa group assailants—seeking to impose their interpretation of Shari’a—reportedly killed 15 people in Kebbi State. In May, bandits killed at least 49 people in Zamfara State, including a Muslim imam. In Niger State, suspected bandits killed 10 farmers, including Christians, and in August, bandits reportedly killed 70 Christians and kidnapped 20 students in separate attacks in Benue State.

The Nigerian federal government also continued to enforce blasphemy laws that include a penalty of up to two years’

imprisonment for acts “persons consider as a public insult on their religion.” Several state governments also enforced their own more stringent blasphemy laws to prosecute and imprison individuals perceived to have insulted religion, including Christians, Muslims, and humanists. At least five prisoners remained in state custody on blasphemy charges at the end of the year, including [Mubarak Bala](#), [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#), [Isma’ila Sani Isah](#), [Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#), and [Abdulazeez Inyass](#). Authorities charged Bala, a humanist, for “insulting the Prophet Muhammad” in 2021 and sentenced him to 24 years in prison in 2022. However, in May, judicial authorities reduced the sentence to five years. In 2020, a court convicted Sharif-Aminu, a Sufi Muslim, for “insulting the religious creed” and sentenced him to death, but a high court ordered a retrial in 2021, and he remains in prison after filing an appeal. Kabara and Inyass remain imprisoned under death sentences that courts imposed in 2022 and 2016, respectively.

Nigeria’s indigenous religious communities—in Muslim-majority and Christian-majority areas alike—came under elevated harassment from state governments that sought to restrict public displays of indigenous practices and rituals. In July, the Anambra State government demolished an indigenous shrine after the governor and Catholic bishops called on the state “to eliminate and banish neo-paganism and the works of darkness and evil.” Similarly, the House of Assembly in Ebonyi State banned certain behavior, such as spiritual cleansing, by indigenous priests in the Izzi community. Elected representatives in both locales reportedly feared violence would result if such local priests carried out religious ceremonies.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Redesignate JAS/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;
- Prioritize providing broad support for Nigerian civil society organizations to lead national dialogue efforts on [implementing](#)

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution 16/18, which advocates that governments must safeguard both religious freedom and freedom of expression in their efforts to combat religious intolerance and discrimination; and

- Redirect U.S. foreign assistance to the government of Nigeria to more effectively address conflict resolution and security sector reform—including enhancing training for officials, the military, and police officers—and link this assistance to specific benchmarks for reducing violence against vulnerable religious communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support efforts through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and others working on human rights in Africa, such as the Congressional Black Caucus, to highlight and address religious freedom and related challenges in Nigeria, including insecurity and atrocity risks; and
- Request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in advancing religious freedom and reducing religiously based violence in the country.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nigeria](#)
- **Hearing:** [Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Non-State Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Nigeria is the most populous [country](#) in Africa, with a population of about 237 million people. Approximately 53 percent of the population are Muslim, 10.6 percent are Roman Catholic, and 35.3 percent are part of other Christian denominations. Other communities, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, make up less than one percent of the population. Many Nigerians practice traditional indigenous religions, although related statistics are difficult to ascertain.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing an official religion. The constitution also recognizes common law courts, traditional law, and Shari'a courts for criminal and noncriminal proceedings, but common law civil courts theoretically have preeminence over all other inferior courts.

Twelve northern states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) [utilize](#) Shari'a-based criminal and personal status laws alongside civil and customary statutes. Shari'a-based laws prohibit blasphemy and other offenses as each state's high court interprets them. Shari'a courts also utilize their own version of a penal code, including corporal punishments for serious criminal offenses that include caning, amputation, and stoning. In October, the Nigerian House of Representatives rejected a bill that would have expanded Islamic law beyond private citizens to potentially apply to businesses and civil society groups, including religious organizations.

Violence by Nonstate Actors

Nonstate actors continue to violently and disproportionately target Nigeria's vulnerable religious communities. The federal government has made some effort to respond to such attacks, but local actors, including state governments and police forces, often lack sufficient resources to effectively do so. Insurgent groups that engage in religiously based violence remain active in the northeast and north-central states, in particular.

Approximately 30,000 Fulani bandits operate in several groups in northwest Nigeria, consisting of anywhere from 10 to 1,000 members each. Bandits predominantly target Christian communities in northwest Nigeria. In 2024, this violence drastically affected food production and fomented extralegal bandit-enforced "taxation" campaigns that primarily victimized Christian farmers.

Fulani and other armed bandits, who are often acting based on criminal motives, conducted raids that also targeted religious minorities. Victims' families have accused the government of responding too slowly to resulting abductions or failing to prevent them. In January, bandits in Ekiti State attacked a school bus and abducted five students

from the Emure Apostolic Faith Primary School. In June, bandits kidnapped and then released a Catholic priest in Zamfara State after police paid his ransom. In August, bandits kidnapped at least 20 students, including Christians, who were traveling to a convention in Benue State. In October, gunmen abducted a Catholic priest in Edo State after he offered himself in place of two students from the Conception Minor Seminary School.

Nigerian Government Counterinsurgency Efforts

In March, President Bola Tinubu promised the government would implement more "detailed strategies" to stop such abductions. The Nigerian government has [utilized](#) both U.S. bilateral and regional multilateral assistance to enhance security efforts and facilitate counterinsurgency operations in the country. These efforts are most evident in the northeast Lake Chad region, where the government has sought to combat nonstate actors and reduce such groups' pernicious impact on religious freedom and broader human rights.

In September, army units in southern Kaduna State coordinated operations against several bandit and insurgent groups targeting religious minorities and rescued 13 kidnapping victims taken in a heavily Christian area. Throughout the summer, the army reportedly eliminated 1,937 combatants from JAS, ISWAP, and smaller bandit groups while arresting 2,782 suspected terrorists and criminal elements and freeing 1,854 hostages. In November, military forces killed dozens of JAS assailants in the Lake Chad region after targeting their food storage site. Earlier in the month, the air force eliminated dozens of bandits in Kebbi and Zamfara states.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Nigeria maintained their bilateral relationship throughout the year. In June, Nigerian parliamentarians spoke in Washington, DC, on their role in overseeing and improving security nationwide. In January, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with the Nigerian foreign minister in Abuja and cited the importance of ensuring security and human rights for Nigerians of all religions and beliefs while also acknowledging the coordinated December 2023 Christmas attacks on Christians in Plateau State. In April, then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [emphasized](#) the bilateral Nigerian partnership at the Bi-National Commission in Abuja. In May, the U.S. Senate confirmed [Richard M. Mills](#) as U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State last designated JAS/Boko Haram and ISWAP as EPCs.