



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: NIGERIA

July 2025

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

By Michael Ardovino, Policy Analyst

Introduction

This country update addresses religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, where religious communities are facing ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of their ability to practice their faith freely. The Nigerian government's enforcement of blasphemy laws and an increase in violent attacks by nonstate entities targeting religious communities constitute significant restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Twelve state governments and the federal government in Nigeria enforce blasphemy laws, prosecuting and imprisoning individuals perceived to have insulted religion. Those targeted include Christians, Muslims, traditional practitioners, and humanists. Furthermore, despite efforts to reduce violence by nonstate actors, the government is often slow to react to violent attacks by Fulani herders, bandit gangs, or insurgents such as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna lid-Dawah wa'al-Jihad (JAS/Boko Haram), the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and other groups invoking Islam to commit acts of violence. This violence severely restricts religious practice and observance by Christians, Muslims, and traditional religious communities across many Nigerian states in the Middle Belt and in the northeast. Perpetrators of the violence have attacked religious sites including churches and mosques, kidnapped or killed religious leaders, and—in some cases—used violence or threats of violence against religious communities while demanding so-called taxes, invoking Shari'a law as justification.

Attacks targeting religious communities remain a major and ongoing threat to religious freedom in Nigeria and are increasing in frequency. In recent months, tensions across religious communities have significantly increased. In March, Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe [testified](#) before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee on the increasing violence against Nigerian Christians in Benue State. Subsequent to testifying, he received [threats](#) by unidentified sources.

This report discusses blasphemy laws and the state-level imposition of Shari'a in ways affecting Muslim and non-Muslim Nigerians, tensions among religious communities, and attacks by violent nonstate entities in the country and briefly assesses the government's response to those attacks. Despite efforts in reducing some attacks by bandits and violent extremists on religious communities, the government continues to fail to stop many deadly attacks against Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists, especially in the Middle Belt and northeastern parts of the country. Since 2009, and again in its [2025](#) Annual Report, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.



Blasphemy Laws and Shari'a Codes

While Nigeria's 1999 constitution declares that federal and state governments cannot adopt an official religion, the country's federal 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." The constitution also grants state governments the authority to adjudicate criminal and noncriminal proceedings through Shari'a courts.

Although these laws apply only to Muslims in theory, some states regularly disregard that limitation and broadly enforce Shari'a. State governments fine, charge, convict, and imprison non-Muslims—including Christians and humanists—on related charges. Nigeria's government permits 12 states in northern Nigeria, along with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), to implement a Shari'a-based legal framework that criminalizes blasphemy and related offenses. Authorities in these jurisdictions additionally enforce a Shari'a-based penal code that levies corporal punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning for a variety of offenses.

In February, the European Parliament passed a resolution [urging](#) the Nigerian government to immediately release all prisoners convicted of blasphemy and repeal related laws at both the federal and state levels, citing them as violations of Nigeria's obligations under international law. In April, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Nigeria is a founding member, [ruled](#) that the Kano State blasphemy provisions violate the country's international legal commitments. Nigerian

government leaders have [hesitated](#) to abolish Shari'a codes, citing possible mob violence by those that support the laws.

Despite releasing Christian nurse Rhoda Jatau in 2023 and humanist Mubarak Bala in early 2025, both of whom were charged and convicted under blasphemy laws, state government authorities continue to hold Sufi Muslim [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) after his arrest in 2022 for sharing audio messages deemed "insulting to the religious creed." In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner [demanded](#) the Nigerian government immediately and unconditionally release him. Authorities arrested Sufi Sheikh [Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#) for blasphemy in 2021 and sentenced him to death in 2022. He remains in prison as of May 2025. The government arrested [Isma'ila Sani Isah](#) on blasphemy charges in 2021, and he remains in prison as well. Sufi cleric [Abdulazeez Inyass](#), whom police arrested in 2015 on similar blasphemy charges, remains in prison under a death sentence.

In March, the northern Nigerian states of Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, and Bauchi closed all grade schools, including public and Christian institutions, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Religious leaders—including Catholic bishops—criticized the decision, emphasizing the importance of [maintaining](#) Nigeria's secular state status. Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) countered by [declaring](#) complaints by Christian leaders a form of intolerance against the majority Muslim populations in the four states. MURIC added that Muslims "should not be denied" because they are the more numerous religious community in those four states. The closure policy also

[drew](#) criticism from some Muslim clerics, who said it lacks religious justification and contradicts Islamic teachings that encourage productivity and continuous learning, even during periods of fast. The federal government also [appealed](#) to the four states to reconsider their decisions while admitting it had no jurisdiction over state schools.

Tension among Ethnoreligious Communities

Ethnoreligious strife in the Middle Belt of Nigeria between [Fulani](#) herders, who are predominantly Muslim, and farmers, who are mostly Christian, is further exacerbated by ongoing attacks, often with fatal results. Attacks in Benue and Plateau States [killed](#) at least 284, with 70 casualties in late April alone. That month, Fulani herders attacked a [bus](#) in Benue State, killing two people and kidnapping 13. In May, in Kogi State, Fulani herders reportedly [abducted](#) pastors Adura Kayode and Kingsley Ebing of the City of Grace Prophetic Liberation Church during a vigil, but a local leader later intervened for their successful release. Interlocutors at a security summit in the state demanded the government commit to more community policing as well as better compensation for those who serve in local defense units. These groups are often referred to as “vigilantes” in Nigeria. In May in Benue State, a violent herder reportedly [shot](#) a Catholic priest, but he survived the injury. In June, assailants [brutally](#) killed at least [200 people](#), including internally displaced persons (IDPs) sheltered in a Catholic mission in Benue State. These attacks prompted President Bola Tinubu to order security agencies to bring an end to the ongoing violence.

Armed Fulani herders are spreading [south](#), with 55 herder groups currently active in the region. While the south historically has experienced relatively peaceful coexistence between religious groups, this new presence carries a risk of increased instability. Furthermore, the significant number of Christians killed in the attacks exacerbates the community’s fear that its members will be violently targeted over their faith. In March, at least 52 people died in attacks in Plateau State, prompting many Christians to [flee](#) the violence that destroyed dozens of homes. The army’s third division barracks is near the attack sites, but the soldiers there reportedly failed to [respond](#). A traditional chief in Delta State also warned that Fulani herders are [threatening](#) livelihoods and the practice of religion with violence in the south of the country.

In April, President Bola Tinubu called on the Plateau State governor to address the underlying communal issues that fueled the clashes and establish enduring peace after recent attacks by sometimes violent Muslim Fulani herders against Christians.

Violent Nonstate Entities

Nigeria’s federal and state authorities continue to tolerate attacks by nonstate entities who [often justify](#) their violence on the basis of a religious ideology and specifically target vulnerable religious communities. Extremists justifying violence on Islamic religious grounds and some violent Fulani herder groups have [expressed](#) a goal of overthrowing Nigeria’s current secular form of government. In May, for example, bandits [threatened](#) an anniversary attack on Saint Francis Catholic Church in Ondo State three years after an initial attack killed dozens on Pentecost, discouraging many this year from attending Mass.

While the military and federal police have become more successful in preventing some attacks during the past year, inadequate resources continue to hamper the government’s ability to prevent the recent surge in violence across the country. Local police and army units frequently do not have the manpower that violent groups [employ](#). Recently in Borno State, ISWAP and JAS/Boko Haram have [used](#) sophisticated drones to surveil army positions and launch explosives.

Violent Insurgents and Bandits

In 2025, several violent insurgent groups that invoke Islam to commit acts of violence continue to restrict freedom of religion and belief in Nigeria. Lakurawa, an affiliate of the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), [has recently increased](#) its violent operations in northwestern Nigeria near the border with Niger, launching 13 attacks so far in 2025 alone. The group originally [emerged](#) from neighboring Niger and Mali 25 years ago, and during the last year it infiltrated Kebbi and Sokoto States, imposing its interpretation of Shari’a. In January, the Nigerian federal government officially [declared](#) Lakurawa a terrorist organization and provided the military with more resources to pursue the group.

JAS/Boko Haram—which the State Department designates as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC)—has [gained](#) strength in recent months as well. In May, a traditional ruler in Borno State reported that the group’s fighters [attacked](#) his community, including traditional practitioners and Christians, and that government soldiers there were ill-equipped to respond adequately. In April, the Sultan of Sokoto [met](#) with several traditional leaders and agreed that nonstate entities threaten all religious communities not only in Borno State but also across the country. In January, JAS/Boko Haram fighters reportedly burned down a [church](#) auditorium and killed several people.

Bandit groups in Nigeria often carry out kidnappings to extort ransom money, and they have increasingly targeted religious institutions that they believe have substantial financial means. The Catholic Church and its clergy often become targets, impacting diocese operations and the larger Christian community. In April, police in Anambra State [rescued](#) unharmed Catholic priest Rev. Father Stephen Echezona, whom bandits had abducted days earlier at a gasoline station. In March, bandits kidnapped Catholic priest Ibrahim Amos in Kaduna State but [released](#) him unharmed hours later. Armed attackers also [abducted](#) Rev. Father Philip Ekweli and seminarian Peter Andrew in Edo State despite a quick response from police units and defensive gunfire from vigilante guards. The abductors later [freed](#) Rev. Father Ekweli but killed the seminarian. In February in Numan, police and vigilantes [captured](#) a kidnapper and freed two priests, Rev. Father Mathew David Dusami of Yola Diocese and Rev. Father Abraham Samman of Jalingo Diocese. The priests were unharmed and the church paid no ransom. Unidentified assailants [killed](#) Father Sylvester Okechukwu after taking him from his home in Kaduna State on Ash Wednesday.

Misinformation

The use of misinformation by generally unidentified actors has recently had a deleterious impact on the safety of religious communities across the country. In 2025, the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria [urged](#) federal security agencies to immediately investigate the use of misinformation in the northern states due to social media messaging calling for Muslims to attack Christians and southerners living in the north. In January in Edo State, police arrested a man who allegedly posted an old video of JAS/Boko Haram fighter activities, suggesting an invasion was imminent in the community. Authorities declared this to be an attempt at misinformation to [create](#) tension and foment violence between religious groups. In May, the Zamfara State governor [debunked](#) a report about a Christian convert there who was about to stand trial in a Shari'a Court for converting from Islam to Christianity. The governor urged security agencies to investigate the source of the false report, describing it as misinformation and an attempt to foment interreligious conflict.

Government Efforts to Combat FoRB-Related Violence

To better protect religious communities, the Nigerian federal police and military have increased efforts to head off attacks by violent Fulani herders and other groups invoking Islam to commit acts of violence against Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists. However, despite the military's use of specialized weapons, counterinsurgency tactics, and improved intelligence techniques, violent actors often have superior manpower and weapons, including advanced drones. These capabilities stymie the military's ability to prevent attacks on religious communities.

One alternative to deploying usually scarce police personnel or military units to combat violent insurgents is the recruitment of local armed volunteers, often called vigilantes. However, vigilante groups have at times appeared to target people on the basis of religion and have faced little accountability for these actions. In March, for example, community vigilantes [executed](#) 16 Muslim Hausa hunters in Edo State, claiming they were bandits searching for victims. Police quickly arrested the perpetrators to reduce the likelihood of any revenge killing targeting Christians. However, a Kaduna police officer [threatened](#) to kill Christians living in the northern states as a result of the executions.

Conclusion

Nigeria's legal system imposes systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, specifically with its use of blasphemy laws in 12 states. Deadly attacks in Nigeria by violent groups as well as kidnappings by bandit gangs targeting religious communities prevent Christians, Muslims, Humanists, and traditionalists from openly and freely practicing their religion or belief. The Nigerian government remains slow or, at times, appears unwilling to respond to this violence, creating an environment of impunity for the attackers. Such events have led the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Most Revered Hassan Kukah, to [warn](#) that "Nigeria is reaching a breaking point."

In its [2025 annual report](#), USCIRF recommended that the State Department designate Nigeria as a CPC and a reconsideration of U.S. foreign assistance to the government of Nigeria. In January 2025, the U.S. government [paused](#) humanitarian assistance to Nigeria, much of which was distributed through faith-based organizations or with the intent of reducing interreligious tensions.



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Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Andrew Hamm
Public Affairs Associate

Sema Hasan
Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller
Policy Analyst

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Molly Naylor-Komyatte
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Deputy Director of Research and Policy

Nathan Wineinger
Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu
Policy Analyst

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