

## Shamsuddeen Magaji Bello

Chairman, Commissioners, and Distinguished Members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am Shamsuddeen Magaji Bello. With profound humility, I thank you for this phenomenal opportunity.

I am honored to be invited to speak to you today not only as someone knowledgeable in African governance and peacebuilding but also as a devout Muslim from Nigeria who has lived through and worked in diverse interreligious settings and with organizations to understand the complex challenges that haunt our faith communities.

As a Muslim, I have often encountered curious and sometimes uncomfortable questions, especially when meeting people abroad. One question that lingers is, 'Why do Muslims kill Christians in Nigeria?' Each time, I pause, not with anger, but with sorrow, because the Islam I know and continue to practice is one of compassion, peace, and justice. It is untouched by politics, grounded instead in faith and human dignity.

I grew up in Kaduna, Nigeria, a place once known for its unity and peaceful coexistence. I was raised on the teachings of Islam, a religion of peace, fairness, and justice. These values were passed down by my parents and teachers and later reinforced through my academic training.

Over time, Kaduna became a symbol of not unity but division, one of the most religiously volatile places in the country. I began to witness how religion, once a force for harmony, was increasingly entangled with politics and wielded to deepen distrust. This painful contrast between what I know and what I've seen compels me to speak today.

Religious freedom in Nigeria is not a singular crisis. It is layered, painful, and often misunderstood. It is a tale of weaponized laws, silenced voices, and broken promises. And too often, it is a story where Muslims themselves, especially those who dissent, differ, or simply live on the margins, are victims of the very systems meant to protect them.

It is important to note that as a Muslim, I believe in Shari'a's potential to deliver justice and dignity when properly implemented. My concern is not with Shari'a but its political exploitation.

When Shari'a law was reintroduced in some states in northern Nigeria in 1999, it was embraced as a divine alternative to the dysfunction and corruption of the secular courts. It was meant to restore dignity, uphold morality, and give voice to the voiceless. But today, that sacred promise has been hijacked.

Instead of defending the oppressed, Shari'a has become a shield for the corrupt and a sword against the powerless. The system is deeply compromised. Judges are not selected for their piety or legal wisdom; politicians install them to serve political ends. In courtrooms that should echo the principles of justice, verdicts are bought, influence is traded, and the scales tilt toward the highest bidder.

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At the frontline of this broken system is the Hisbah, a morality police empowered in several states in Nigeria's north not by divine mandate but by political decree. They do not patrol corruption in high offices or call to account those who desecrate the public trust. Instead, they pursue the poor, the young, the outspoken.

Social media influencers, many from marginalized backgrounds, are routinely arrested for actions deemed "immoral." No convictions. No due process. Just arbitrary detention, public shaming, and reputational damage. Their real offense? Daring to be visible, different, or critical in a society that rewards conformity and punishes expression.

Meanwhile, the powerful walk free, embezzling funds, abusing women, and exploiting public resources, all under the blind eye of this moral order. This is not the Shari'a of justice I know as a Muslim. It is a corrupted system dressed in religious robes, a farce that defiles the very name of Islam. Until we confront this reality, until we name and dismantle this injustice, young Muslims will continue to lose faith not in God but in the institutions that claim to speak in His name.

Regarding the issue of blasphemy laws, it is important to note that the legal provisions applied in northern Nigeria are drawn from the same Islamic legal traditions, identical in wording and spirit to those enforced in countries like Saudi Arabia, a long-standing ally of the United States. This is not necessarily to justify their application in Nigeria's context but to illustrate the global complexity of navigating blasphemy laws within modern legal and human rights frameworks.

As a devout Muslim, I recognize the utmost importance of respecting the sanctity of my cherished religion. After all, what is a religion if its followers do not hold it with reverence? However, blasphemy laws in Nigeria are applied with alarming selectivity. They have become weapons used not to defend the faith but to silence alternative voices within Islam.

A vivid example is Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru Kabara, a renowned Muslim cleric in Kano, Nigeria, who, because of heated debates and unreconcilable differences with other Muslim scholars, now faces the death penalty, convicted in a process steeped in politics and religious sectarianism but evidently not justice.

But even more chilling is the state's systematic persecution of Shi'a Muslims. In 2015, Amnesty International reported that over 300 members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria were massacred in a single day by the Nigerian Army in Zaria, Nigeria. Their leader, Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky, and his wife were detained for years without a fair trial. Attacks against them occur regularly with little public outrage in Nigeria. And what was the national reaction? Silence. Justification. Indifference.

As a Muslim, I do not belong to any religious sect. Perhaps this has given me the luxury of objectivity. It is my utmost belief that sectarianism is the primary enabler of violence among Muslims in Nigeria. Islam in Nigeria is a competition between the Sunnis and the Shiites, with further major sub-divisions among the two sects.

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To many Sunni Muslims, Shi'ites are branded as non-Muslims. So, their deaths are not mourned. Their pain is not acknowledged. In contrast, the killing of Christians, rightly condemned, often provoked more outrage than the execution of the Shiites. This is not merely a doctrinal divide. It is a failure of our collective humanity.

In northern Nigeria, religious clerics often emerge without any regulatory oversight to assess their theological credentials or preaching content. Extremist clerics usually rise in influence through charisma, financial support, or political backing, not through any formal training or certification.

They quickly gain social and political prominence as long as they can afford to construct a mosque and attract a following. In many cases, even when their rhetoric is divisive or extreme, they are tolerated as long as they mobilize support for political actors. This environment of unchecked influence is precisely how individuals like Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, rose to prominence. They were initially ignored or exploited by the political establishment until their ideologies turned violent.

Terrorist groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and recently Lakurawa portray themselves as defenders of Islam, but that is far from the case. Their victims span every faith and ethnicity. Muslims, Christians, and Traditionalists alike. But anytime they kill, the blame goes to all Muslims who earnestly abhor their nefarious practices.

But let it be clearly stated that countless Muslims have died and continue to die at the hands of these self-proclaimed Islamist insurgents. Mosques have been bombed during Jumu'ah prayers. Muslim scholars who reject extremism have been assassinated. Muslim families, mine included, live with the trauma of being kidnapped, raped, or killed in silence. In recent times, banditry and kidnapping for ransom have been the order of the day, especially in the northwestern part of the country. Many communities have been razed and burnt by these groups of people, and many Muslims live in fear of uncertainty.

Yet, the Nigerian government has failed to act with the urgency this crisis demands. In some cases, it has even enabled chaos through inaction. At the heart of this crisis is a deeper betrayal. Politicians and some clerics have commodified Islam as a religion. It is no longer a sacred path but a means to an end.

Those in power invoke Islam to secure votes or silence dissent. Some preachers use the pulpit to collect riches, not to guide souls. And the masses? They are told that questioning these leaders is a rebellion against God, punishable by hellfire. This is spiritual blackmail masquerading as faith. And it has eroded the moral core of our society.

To support efforts at improving religious freedom in Nigeria, it is important USCIRF urge the Nigerian government to recognize and engage with the complex, multifaceted challenges facing Muslim communities, including internal persecution and systemic injustice. Constructive

engagement should encourage reforms that strengthen the independence of Shari'a courts and promote greater accountability and oversight of religious enforcement bodies such as the Hisbah.

It is equally important to support initiatives that enhance transparency in the recognition of religious leadership to help prevent the exploitation of religious platforms for extremist or political gain. Elevating inclusive and justice-oriented Islamic voices particularly those working toward peaceful intra-faith dialogue can contribute meaningfully to national unity.

Development and humanitarian assistance can also help address the needs of all communities affected by insurgent violence, including mental health and post-conflict recovery support. Finally, encouraging dialogue and accountability in response to major incidents such as the Zaria massacre can reinforce the rule of law while strengthening Nigeria's long-term stability and democratic values.