

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor as both state and nonstate actors continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations. Despite Nigeria's constitution protecting religious freedom, Nigerian citizens faced blasphemy charges and convictions, violence, and attacks during religious ceremonies.

State authorities in the north of the country, particularly in Kano State, charged and convicted several individuals for blasphemy in 2021. In June 2021, the Department of State Security (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 had recently announced a [new policy](#) that required poets and singers to submit their material to the board for approval. In July, authorities arrested Sheikh Abduljabara Kabara and charged him with blasphemy and incitement, claiming his sermons were "[mortifying \[to\] the companions and the Holy Prophet Muhammad.](#)" The arrest followed a debate [organized by the government](#) in which Kabara argued precepts of Islam with state-backed clerics. Also in July, authorities charged prominent humanist leader Mubarak Bala with causing a public disturbance by posting blasphemous content on social media. Authorities had detained Bala without charge for 15 months prior to announcing the official charges. Moreover, [a mob](#) in Kano State killed a reverend in retaliation for his alleged involvement in converting a local member of a Muslim family to Christianity.

In a positive development, in January the Kano State High Court [overturned](#) the blasphemy conviction and death sentence

of 16-year-old Omar Farouq, citing irregularities. The same court, citing the same irregularities, ordered that the blasphemy case against Muslim gospel musician [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) be retried, but he remains in detention. In July, a court [acquitted](#) Ibrahim el-Zakzaky of all charges related to his activities leading the Shi'a Muslim group the Islamic Movement of Nigeria.

A diverse array of nonstate actors in Nigeria also continued to conduct attacks on houses of worship, religious leaders, and religious congregations in 2021. Activity by criminal and armed groups throughout the year accounted for six attacks on houses of worship, including at least five [attacks](#) against [mosques](#) in [Katsina, Niger, and Zamfara](#) states and six [attacks](#) against [churches](#) in [Kaduna State](#). In November, churches in Zamfara State received [threatening messages](#) from local armed groups demanding that they close or risk ferocious attacks. At least 13 religious leaders were [kidnapped for ransom](#) over the course of the year, including eight [priests](#), two [pastors](#), and two [imams](#). Although government efforts to hold perpetrators accountable appear to have increased compared with previous years, the Nigerian government has often failed to respond sufficiently to violence against religious leaders and congregations.

While Boko Haram's top general, Abubakar Shekau, died this year, militant Islamist groups Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) continued to [control territory](#), conduct attacks based on belief, and [enforce their interpretations](#) of religious law and practice in communities under their control.

### 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), and 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;
  - Fund programs to:
    - Support interfaith civil society action on decriminalizing blasphemy and promoting religious freedom in Nigeria;
    - Increase access to justice for victims of attacks on religious leaders and congregations, including supporting judicial and security sector reform where appropriate and considering options for utilizing the recent \$2.1 billion (USD) assistance package announced in November 2021; and
  - Direct U.S. Embassy officials to urge the Nigerian government develop and implement a plan to decriminalize blasphemy across the country and, in the interim, make blasphemy a bailable offense and protect the safety of individuals accused of blasphemy
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Request a briefing from the U.S. Department of State to explain how it is implementing U.S. policy on Nigeria to promote religious freedom and report on the effectiveness of such efforts.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Violations in Kano State, Nigeria](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)

## Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated [219 million people](#). Of its population, an estimated 53.5 percent identify as Muslim; 45.9 percent as Christian; and 0.6 percent with other religious beliefs, including atheism, African traditional religions, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Religious traditions, practices, and communities play a strong role in social life across Nigeria, with religious institutions providing health and educational services and opportunities for community and civic engagement.

Nigeria's [constitution](#) protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing a state religion and from discriminating on the basis of religion. The [Nigerian Criminal Code](#) includes a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for insulting a person's religion. Additionally, 12 northern states use criminal and family codes based in Islamic Shari'a alongside civil and customary laws; these codes prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on a particular state interpretation of Islamic law.

## Other Religious Restrictions in Kano State

In addition to the blasphemy cases discussed above, in February 2021, the Kano government [sent](#) heavily armed personnel from the DSS to prevent a local Muslim community from protesting the closure of their mosque and prohibited the community from carrying out its annual *Mauqibi* religious festival. This action followed Kano authorities [banning Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#) from preaching in the state and ordering the closure of his mosque and schools in February, accusing him of inciteful rhetoric and sermons.

In July 2021, Kano's Hisbah Board, which oversees a religious police force, [arrested and charged five men](#) suspected of engaging in homosexual activity. Individuals convicted of sodomy under Kano's Shari'a Criminal Code 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.

## Attacks on Religious Leaders and Congregations

Throughout the year, religious leaders and congregations faced both state and nonstate violence based on their beliefs or their religious identity. State officials reportedly [used violence against](#) Shi'a Muslims during a procession marking the religious holiday of Arbaeen in September. During Ramadan, [bomb blasts](#) near a mosque killed at least 27 worshipers in Mubi, while armed assailants [kidnapped 11 worshipers](#) from a mosque in Katsina State. In May, armed actors [burned down a church](#) during an attack in Kaduna State that killed eight people. In July, armed actors reportedly [burned four churches](#) in attacks against communities in Kaduna. In September, a violent mob in Kano State [attacked and killed](#) a local reverend in retaliation for his alleged involvement in converting a member of a Muslim family to Christianity. In October, two worshipers were killed in Kaduna State in an [attack on a church](#) during morning prayers. In November, churches in Zamfara State received [threatening messages](#) from local armed actors demanding that they close or risk ferocious attacks. Attacks on mosques killed [18 worshipers](#) in Niger State in October,

[five worshipers](#) in Zamfara State in November, and [16 worshipers](#) in Niger State in December.

Meanwhile, criminal gangs substantially increased their kidnap-for-ransom activities and did not spare religious institutions. Attacks and abductions targeting religious institutions, regardless of their motives, infringe on Nigerians' freedom to worship safely and impinge on their rights of religious practice. Across the country, [at least 13 religious leaders were kidnapped for ransom in](#) 2021. While most abducted religious leaders have been released, some have died during these abductions, including a [pastor](#) in Akoko Ondo, a [priest](#) and an [imam](#) in Katsina, and an [imam](#) in Ogun. Kidnappers also targeted two religious schools, abducting hundreds of school children from [Salihu Tanko Islamic School](#) and [Bethel Baptist High School](#).

## Key Developments Regarding EPCs

Since 2002, militant Islamist group [Boko Haram](#) has operated out of northeastern Nigeria and conducted attacks on the basis of religion and belief throughout the Lake Chad Basin region. In June 2021, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was [reportedly killed](#). More than 6,000 Boko Haram fighters then [surrendered](#) to the Nigerian military and disarmed.

Despite the loss of its top general, Boko Haram reportedly [expanded](#) its reach in northcentral Nigeria in 2021. In areas they have infiltrated, Boko Haram elements have [reportedly](#) directed residents to remove their children from formal schools and ordered both Muslim and Christian parents to marry off their daughters at the age of 12 or "face consequences." Additionally, ISWAP continued to conduct violence in pursuit of its goals to enforce a particular interpretation of Islam, including continuing to hold [Leah Sharibu](#) hostage for refusing to convert to Islam.

## Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, U.S. officials raised religious freedom issues, including societal abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion in the context of growing insecurity throughout the country, in meetings with key Nigerian government officials. U.S. officials in the country also frequently engaged [faith leaders](#) and stakeholders in [interfaith dialogue](#) and [broader peacebuilding work](#), including in Kaduna and Plateau states where religious violence has historically been particularly high.

In 2021, the U.S. government paused some military sales to Nigeria in response to alleged human rights violations in the country. While in July Nigeria [received](#) six of the 12 A-29 Super Tucano light attack airplanes it bought from the U.S. in 2017, Congress [halted](#) a nearly \$1 billion USD arms sale that same month after allegations emerged of human rights abuses by the Nigerian military in its campaign to neutralize terrorists in its territory.

On November 15, the State Department [removed](#) Nigeria from its list of governments that engaged in and tolerated particularly severe religious freedom violations, despite the country being designated as a CPC the previous year based on conditions similar to those in 2021. Also in November, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken announced a [\\$2.1 billion development assistance package](#) during a visit to Abuja.