



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY UPDATE: VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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USCIRF's Mission

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

Violence and Religious Freedom in Nigeria

Introduction

In recent years, nonstate actor violence has *increased* in most parts of Nigeria, and this violence has yielded devastating *humanitarian* and *human rights* consequences, including but not limited to violence based on religion and other violations of Nigerians' rights to freedom of religion or belief.

This issue update identifies the ways in which the following types of widespread violence by nonstate actors in Nigeria threaten freedom of religion or belief for Nigerians: militant Islamist group violence, some forms of identity-based violence, mob violence, and violence impacting worship. It also explores the role that poor governance plays in driving much of this violence, as well as the impact on religious freedom of several aggravating factors exacerbating insecurity, including localized religious discrimination, the politicization of religion, and wider demographic and economic trends. It concludes by highlighting the U.S. government's responsibility to respond to religious freedom violations and rising atrocity risk in Nigeria, as mandated by U.S. law, and laying out policy response options.

Background

Africa's most populous country, Nigeria reflects tremendous religious diversity. Of the country's roughly 225 million people, *estimates suggest* that approximately 53.5 percent identify as Muslim (including practitioners of Maliki, Tijaniyya, Qandiriyya, and Shi'a traditions), and 45.9 percent identify as Christian (including practitioners of Catholicism and a variety of Protestant traditions). The remaining 0.6 percent (1.3 million people) reportedly identify as Baha'i, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, humanist or nontheist, or practitioners of traditional or indigenous religions.

Throughout much of the country, Sufi Muslim and Christian communities share a strong history of tolerance, coexistence, and interfaith harmony. Religious conversion and interfaith marriage are common in many states, and Christian and Muslim communities report jointly celebrating religious holidays from both traditions. With a vibrant marketplace for ideas, Nigerians often merge religious practices from a variety of traditions and influences.

Article 38 of the *Nigerian Constitution* provides a strong foundation for the protection of freedom of religion or belief, reflecting language in international legal covenants. Article 10 prohibits the federal or state governments from adopting any religion as a state religion. With a pluralistic legal structure, religious and customary courts are explicitly prohibited from violating Nigerians' rights as determined under the

constitution, and secular common law courts hold jurisdiction to hear and determine appeals from all lower courts. The federal calendar observes all major Christian and Muslim holidays, and federal government policy requires that both Muslim and Christian students have access to spiritual education in accordance with their faith.

Violence Impacting Religious Freedom in Nigeria

Nigeria is battling several concurrent security crises. Militant Islamist groups originating in the northeast region have [expanded their territory](#) west and south. In several regions, [criminal armed groups](#) target civilians and infrastructure to enrich themselves and expand territorial control. In areas of the northwest, northcenter, and south, resource conflicts and population movements have heightened group tensions and yielded deadly cycles of retaliatory [identity-based violence](#). In the [southeast](#), separatists associated with the Biafran liberation movement have taken up arms to fight for secession. Meanwhile, [increased piracy](#) in the Gulf of Guinea, rising [gang violence](#) in Nigeria's ballooning metropolises, and a fragile peace accord with rebels in the [Niger Delta](#) also contribute to a tenuous security situation in the country and pull resources from the cash-strapped government.

As a result of this insecurity, many Nigerians face a daily threat of violence. Some of this violence has significant implications for Nigerians' freedom of religion or belief. Violence that infringes on freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria includes militant Islamist violence, identity-based violence at the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and geographic heritage, mob violence against individuals accused of blasphemy, and violence impacting worship.

Militant Islamist Group Violence

In the northeast and parts of the northwest, [militant Islamist groups](#) conduct violence in pursuit of political and ideological objectives, often with devastating humanitarian and religious freedom consequences. The Islamist State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) currently presents the [largest threat](#), although factions of Boko Haram and the al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaru also operate in some regions. ISWAP, Boko Haram, and Ansaru have all stated political objectives to overthrow secular governance in Nigeria and enforce a particular interpretation of Islam. Militant Islamist groups target non-Muslim communities as well as Muslims who disagree with or oppose their interpretation of Islamic practice and tradition.

In February, alleged ISWAP fighters [killed three people](#) and burned a church in an attack on a Christian community in Chibok. In April, ISWAP fighters [bombed a bar](#) in Taraba State, killing three people and injuring 19 in their attempt to target a "gathering of infidel Christians." That same month, Nigerian security forces reportedly repelled an attempt by Islamist fighters to attack [worshippers](#) breaking fast during Ramadan in Geidam, Yobe state. In June, armed assailants attacked a Catholic [church](#) in Owo, Ondo state on Pentecost Sunday, killing 40 people, with government investigations blaming ISWAP fighters for the attack.

ISWAP [cruelly punishes](#) those it sees as contravening its interpretation of Islam, including amputating the hands of alleged thieves, killing adulterers, and massacring civilians in communities that disobey orders or refuse to pay religious obligation taxes. ISWAP continues to hold Christian student and USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience [Leah Sharibu](#) hostage for refusing to convert to Islam. Local activists reported in June that Ansaru [banned political activities](#) in its areas of control in Kaduna State in the run up to the February 2023 elections. Ansaru's disapproval of the democratically elected government in Nigeria stems from its criticism of the government's secular nature, among other things, and attempts to limit Nigerians' engagement in representative governance may also reflect the group's agenda to impose governance based on a singular and political interpretation of Islam.

Identity-based Violence

In several regions of Nigeria, attackers target individuals and groups based on their identity or perceived affiliation with a particular identity group. In some states, religion, ethnicity, and geographic heritage intersect to create in-groups and out-groups against which violent actors mobilize. Local leaders and inflammatory civil discourse often exacerbate the perceived role of religion in this violence, spreading unsupported narratives of ideological or fundamentalist motivations on the part of perpetrators. As a result, religious communities have grown [increasingly mistrustful](#) of one another and fearful of being targeted on the basis of religion.

In August 2021, armed youth [attacked a convoy of buses](#) in Plateau state transporting Muslims from a religious celebration, killing at least 22 people and injuring 14 others. In April 2022 clashes in [Chando Zerreci](#) killed at least seven people, including Christians and Muslims, when gunmen attacked an annual cultural festival, allegedly as retaliation for the August convoy attack.

A May 2022 [attack](#) in the predominantly Christian and Igbo-dominated southeast that killed a pregnant Muslim Hausa woman and her four children demonstrates how religion can intersect with other relevant aspects of identity to increase people's vulnerability to atrocities. While the motivations for this attack are unclear, reports from the ground reveal that such violence in that region often targets individuals perceived as outsiders because of some combination of their religion (e.g., Islam), ethnicity (e.g., Hausa), and/or perceived geographic origin (e.g., northerner). In this case, the potential to interpret religion as a key factor in the attack prompted both a public [condemnation](#) from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and a [statement](#) from Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), seemingly seeking to dissuade Muslim youth in other parts of the country from retaliating.

Mob Violence

In some regions of the country, mob violence against individuals who express sentiments that others within the society consider blasphemous also threatens religious freedom in Nigeria. In May 2022, a violent mob of university students in Kano state [stoned](#) a Christian student to death and burned her body in response to a comment she made in a WhatsApp thread that they considered insulting to Islam. Police in the vicinity proved either unable or unwilling to quell the unrest, and authorities reportedly limited charges against the alleged perpetrators to [“conspiracy and inciting public disturbance.”](#) In June, an angry mob in Abuja [stoned and burned](#) a Muslim man to death for alleged blasphemy, although investigations implicated organized criminal activity as likely playing a major role in the incident.

The risk of mob violence also impacts freedom of religion or belief by creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for people with dissenting beliefs and worldviews. The high risk of mob violence against people who are perceived to insult religion, combined with poor governance and weak justice institutions, constitutes the state's justification for enforcing blasphemy laws to prevent mob justice and maintain public order. These laws disproportionately impact individuals with minority or dissenting opinions, or religious interpretations. These individuals include humanist and USCIRF religious prisoners of conscience [Mubarak Bala](#) and Tijaniyya Muslim [Yahaya Sharif Aminu](#), as well as Qandiriyya Muslim Sheikh [Abduljabara Kabara](#).

Violence Impacting Worship

Across theaters of violence in Nigeria, many armed actors target worshippers and religious congregations. In addition to the incidents highlighted in sections on militant Islamist violence and identity-based violence, other incidents have threatened religious services and ceremonies. Armed actors have also abducted religious leaders that communities rely upon to lead them in collective worship.

In November, unidentified fighters killed five worshippers and kidnapped 18 in an attack on a [mosque](#) in Dutsen Gari, Zamfara state. In December, unknown gunmen attacked a [mosque](#) in Ba'are, Niger state, killing at least nine worshippers. In March 2022 alleged bandits reportedly abducted [14 worshippers](#) from a mosque during *Isha* prayers in Kaduna. In June two simultaneous [attacks on churches](#) in Kaduna state reportedly killed eight people and resulted in 38 abductions. In July armed actors [abducted two priests](#) in Kaduna state, resulting in the death of one.

Motives for targeting religious infrastructure and leaders vary across actors and contexts. In [at least one instance](#), unidentified threats against worshippers appear to reflect ideological intentions. Religious services and leaders also make easy and predictable targets for armed groups seeking to target community leaders or large crowds, garner media attention, or make money through abduction-for-ransom schemes. Regardless of perpetrators' motivations, attacks on worshippers and religious leaders constitute a threat to religious freedom because they infringe on Nigerians' rights to worship peacefully. Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) and Article 38 of the [Nigerian Constitution](#) both protect Nigerians' rights to manifest their religion or belief publicly and collectively through worship.

Drivers and Aggravators of Violence

This section provides a brief analysis of the root causes and exacerbating factors of nonstate actor violence in Nigeria.

Main Drivers of Violence Impacting Religious Freedom

During USCIRF's June 2022 visit to Nigeria, various stakeholders identified poor governance as a core driver of violence in the country and lamented the government's inability to provide services, security, and justice equitably across its population. Numerous [analyses](#) and [policy reports](#) corroborate that [poor governance](#) is one of the main drivers of violent conflict throughout the country.

Many Nigerians face significant challenges meeting their basic needs. Inflation and un- and underemployment are additional drivers of violence that have pushed [millions](#) of Nigerians into poverty. Nigeria's security sector institutions are not designed to meet the country's security needs. Three decades of military rule in the latter half of the 20th century led to corruption, apathy, and poor accountability for military performance—[challenges](#) that subsequent civilian governments have failed to address, to the detriment of security and, consequently, religious freedom and other human rights.

Despite highly decentralized governance, the country's police force is federalized and is poorly staffed, equipped, and funded. At the federal level, government officials have demonstrated either an unwillingness or an inability to effectively curb widespread [corruption](#), which allegedly siphons off crucial funds from the public budget. According to informants on the ground, both military and police officers often do not receive salaries or reinforcements for months at a time and instead resort to selling weapons and ammunition and preying on the populations they are meant to protect. There are [limited](#) systems for holding security forces accountable for poor performance, and lawmakers have failed to prioritize meaningful [police reform](#) efforts.

In this context, violence entrepreneurs have thrived by making money through intimidation, abduction, and attack, including attacking religious leaders and infrastructure. Communities have self-armed to meet their own security needs and protect their property. Government officials [allow](#), [encourage](#), and even [partner with](#) vigilante groups and self-defense militias to supplement their poor capacity. These informal arrangements create [opportunities](#) for abuse of power, arms proliferation, and human rights abuses like violations of religious freedom rights.

Moreover, inadequate justice sector capacity and performance has reinforced a culture of impunity, exacerbating the violence economy. The Nigerian government often fails to hold perpetrators of violence accountable and meet victims' expectations for justice. Government institutions have struggled to incentivize and support officials to conduct thorough and timely investigations into the perpetrators of violence, including that which impacts freedom of religion or belief. In the sporadic, often high-profile, cases where police have made arrests, local informants report that judicial institutions have frequently struggled to prosecute perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law.

Judicial institutions also often fail to communicate about the status of investigations and justice efforts to communities affected by violence, leaving them feeling abandoned by the state. The limited benefits of justice institutions, for example, instances of the state paying financial restitution to victims of violence, appear opportunistic and inequitably distributed. Officials have also not sufficiently communicated with the public regarding the benefits of the deradicalization and reintegration program for former Islamist fighters, which communities view as state support to perpetrators of religious violence.

Aggravating Factors Impacting Religious Freedom

Several factors aggravate violence impacting freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria, including increasing localized religious discrimination against both Christians and Muslims in various parts of the country. In southern states, Muslims report harassment during daily prayers. In northern states, Christians report bureaucratic roadblocks to establishing houses of worship. Both groups report difficulty accessing education and employment in areas where they are religious minorities. Available evidence suggests that these challenges often arise from bias and/or corruption among low-level public officials and are eventually rectified by higher authorities through slow-moving bureaucratic processes. However, this lengthy process allows resentment to fester among both Muslim and Christian communities, leaving each vulnerable to narratives that vilify the other and imply state coercion in religious discrimination and violence.

Such vulnerability is particularly problematic for religious freedom in a context where elites politicize religious identity for personal gain. Nigerian stakeholders consistently report that political, economic, religious, traditional, and media leaders invoke narratives of ideological righteousness and religious persecution to raise funds, mobilize support, and otherwise flaunt or wield power in society. The pervasiveness of such rhetoric in national discourse contributes to [perceptions](#) of grievances based in religion for both Muslims and Christians.

Wider demographic and economic trends further exacerbate these issues. Population growth and movements strain the country's governance institutions. Birth rates in the predominantly Muslim north are [significantly higher](#) than in the primarily Christian south, which may leave Christians feeling insecure about their standing in a rapidly-changing demographic reality and may leave Muslims facing higher poverty rates as northern states struggle to meet the needs of their exploding populations. Global factors like [oil prices](#), [climate change](#), and the [war in Ukraine](#) have destabilized the Nigerian economy, contributing to inflation and food insecurity and increasing Nigerians' sense of grievance and desperation.

Risk of Atrocities

The risk of atrocities for Nigeria is high. In 2021, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project ranked Nigeria's risk of experiencing a new mass killing event in the coming year the [eighth highest](#) in the world and noted that it had experienced at least one mass killing event the previous year. Nigerians also face abduction, torture, inhumane treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, and forced or coerced recruitment. Apparent [territorial](#) and [tactical](#) advancements by powerful armed groups in 2022 heighten atrocity risk still further. These atrocities pose risks to religious freedom, among other rights and freedoms, for Nigerians.

U.S. law requires the Administration to prioritize policy efforts to address atrocity risk and religious freedom violations. The [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) mandates that the U.S. government take action against countries and other actors that engage in or tolerate particularly severe religious freedom violations. The [Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act](#) of 2018 requires the U.S. government to regard the prevention of atrocities as in its national interest, including by placing a high priority on timely, preventive diplomatic efforts. In the case of Nigeria, violence and its impact on religious freedom and elevated atrocity risk warrant significant U.S. government action.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Many of the core drivers of violence in Nigeria relate to poor governance. The state's inability to provide services, security, and justice equitably to its citizens erodes societal capacity to mitigate conflicts without violence. These drivers intersect with local, regional, and global aggravating factors to embed intractable cycles of violence. Low level religious discrimination and the politicization of religion by elites collide with population growth and economic challenges to further strain governance institutions and contribute to growing grievances.

Religious freedom violations represent one of several impacts of widespread violence and insecurity in Nigeria. Militant Islamist violence, identity-based violence at the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and geographic heritage, mob violence against individuals accused of blasphemy, and violence impacting worship all threaten Nigerians' rights to freedom of religion or belief as protected under Nigerian and international law.

Given the complex nature of the drivers of violence impacting religious freedom in Nigeria, interagency decisionmakers should prioritize a timely and holistic policy approach to addressing instability, atrocity risk, and its impacts on religious freedom and other human rights. To that end:

1. The U.S. government must demonstrate a strong, public show of commitment to addressing drivers of atrocities and religious freedom violations in Nigeria. The Administration including Nigeria as a priority country for the [Atrocity Prevention Task Force](#) or naming a Special Envoy to parts of the country and the surrounding region where violence based on religion is particularly high would cement a visible commitment to prioritizing these issues in U.S. foreign policy. Alternatively, Congress passing a high-profile emergency atrocity prevention package could demonstrate a similar show of commitment to protecting freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental rights for all Nigerians.
2. The U.S. government must reevaluate and adjust its relationship with the Nigerian government to better incentivize progress on religious freedom and human rights protections. Nigeria receives significant financial assistance from the United States and is a key partner in development and security programming in the region. This assistance should be conditioned on demonstrated, calculable progress on human rights and atrocity prevention indicators by the Nigerian government.



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3. The State Department should redesignate Nigeria a country of particular concern (CPC), as recommended in USCIRF's April 2022 [Annual Report](#), for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.
4. The U.S. government should also continue to prioritize peacebuilding and violence reduction programs in Nigeria, as well as increase funding to programs that support interfaith civil society action on promoting religious freedom and increase access to justice for victims of attacks impacting religious freedom.
5. Congress should revitalize the bipartisan Nigeria caucus to place due focus on challenges facing security, human rights, and religious freedom in Nigeria. Congress should also request the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in achieving U.S. policy objectives there, and the Administration should adjust policy based on the outcomes of this assessment.

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