

nigeria

PERSECUTION 101





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The ability to worship by one's conscience is under serious threat in Africa's most populous country—a reality that bodes ill for the rest of the region.

Terrorism, violent militancy, and community-level unrest have rocked Nigeria's Christian community for decades. Consistently victims of armed violence, Christians in Nigeria also live under a government either incapable of enforcing rule of law or unwilling to protect them in the fractious Middle Belt and northern regions. And in northern third of the country, Christians and other religious minorities live under harsh blasphemy laws that empower violent mobs and harshly criminalize disfavored religious beliefs.

QUICK FACTS



Federal
Democracy

Type of Government



Bola Ahmed
Tinubu of the APC
Party
(since May 2023)

Chief Executive



230.8 million
2023 estimate

Total Population



53.5% Muslim
131 million
45.9% Christian
106 million

Religious Demography



30% Hausa
15.5% Yoruba
15.2% Igbo
6% Fulani
33.3% Other

Ethnic Demography

TYPES OF PERSECUTION



Government Neglect

The government refuses to adequately address the violence, often abandoning the Christians to fend for themselves in the most violence-torn areas.

Government Abuse

in Kaduna State and elsewhere, government officials actively persecute Christians, harassing, arresting, and exposing them to violence through dangerous curfews and other legal measures.



Terrorism

Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province, two.

Militancy

Communal-level militant groups harassing and attacking remote Christian communities, particularly in the northern and central areas of the country.



ICC IN NIGERIA

ICC has worked in Nigeria for many years, primarily in the Middle Belt and northern regions given the considerable number of vulnerable Christian communities there. Whether paying the medical bills for a young girl wounded in a militant attack or setting up large communal farms that support hundreds, ICC is committed to bandaging the wounded and strengthening the church in Nigeria. Communal farms, one of ICC's most successful aid models in Nigeria, have been established in dozens of communities and help to support some of the tens of thousands of Christian farmers pushed off their land by armed attackers.

In other communities, ICC supports children orphaned by the violence. Some are children of pastors, and many were forced to flee their homes during traumatic nighttime raids. Now without resources of their own, they need aid to break what could turn into cyclical poverty and ICC helps to pay for their school fees and food.

“While the Nigerian government continues to sit on its hands, thousands of Nigerian Christians are dying at the hands of violent militants bent on their destruction. It is an outrage in the international community and something the world must wake up to immediately.”

—Jeff King

Political Backgrounder for Religious Freedom Issues in Nigeria

A recovering British colony, Nigeria has long suffered from internal stresses that threaten to tear it apart. Whether ethnic, economic, or religious, there seems to be no end to the fault lines. Still, some are more obvious than others. Ethnic and economic divides, for example are easy to see—the country is home to more than 250 distinct ethnic groups and there are large regional disparities in access to resources.

Unfortunately, religious tensions in the country are often ignored at the cost of the ability to forge an effective solution to the nuanced issues at stake.

Nigeria is currently in its fourth and longest attempt at democracy since independence from British rule in 1960. Elections in February of 2023 led Bola Tinubu, a member of the All-Progressives Congress (APC) party, to the presidency with a relatively compelling 37% of the vote to the second-place finisher's 29%. However, only 27% of eligible voters participated in the election, meaning that Tinubu's victory netted him just 9.3% of eligible voters—hardly a compelling electoral mandate in a country already struggling to find common ground.

Despite campaign promises to marginalize areas that did not vote for him, in his acceptance speech Tinubu promised to represent the interests of all Nigerians. Time will tell which promise Tinubu intends to keep.

Tinubu abandoned the long-standing tradition of presidential candidates choosing a running mate from a different faith when he chose Kashim Shettima, a fellow Muslim and former governor of Borno State, to join him on the APC ticket. His choice sparked harsh criticism among non-Muslim leaders who felt that the decision marginalized the interests of other religious groups.

Historically, the government—under both Christian president Goodluck Jonathan and Muslim president Muhammadu Buhari—has failed to provide any effective response to the violence or adequate protection to vulnerable communities regularly targeted for their religion, such as in southern Kaduna State where certain Christian communities have been attacked by Muslim extremists repeatedly over the years.

If Tinubu is serious about quelling the violence in Nigeria, one factor that he must address is religion. Though not the only factor at play, it is a major one and one that he cannot afford to ignore.

YEAR	USCIRF Recommendation	State Dept. Action
2003	Special Watchlist*	None
2004	Special Watchlist*	None
2005	Special Watchlist*	None
2006	Special Watchlist*	None
2007	Special Watchlist	None
2008	Special Watchlist*	None
2009	CPC	None
2010	CPC	None
2011	CPC	None
2012	CPC	None
2013	CPC	None
2014	CPC	None
2015	CPC	None
2016	CPC	None
2017	CPC	None
2018	CPC	None

YEAR	USCIRF Recommendation	State Dept. Action
2019	CPC	
2020	CPC	CPC - Sanctions Waived
2021	CPC	
2022	CPC	
2023	CPC	

*Called the USCIRF Watchlist at this time

Resources and Reports

- [No Protest Allowed: A Profile of Nigeria's Governor El-Rufai and How He Punishes Dissent in Kaduna State](#)
- [Secular Sharia? Criminal Sharia Law and its Impact on Nigeria's Christian Communities](#)
- [USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Nigeria Chapter](#)
- [State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Nigeria Chapter](#)

“Christian communities in the Middle Belt of Nigeria have effectively suffered a twenty yearlong genocide,” said ICC President Jeff King. Where is any action? The Nigerian government gives these attacks lip service without any meaningful response. Where is the outcry? Where is effective action? In Nigeria, the military, the police, and the intelligence agencies are all controlled by Muslims. This coupled with a 20-year lack of response by these agencies should naturally lead to deeper questioning by the world community. Simply put, the time for cheap talk and platitudes is over. The world is waking up and starting to ask, ‘Is the Nigerian government complicit in these attacks?’ Time will tell, but for this long-time watcher, the decision is in.”

