

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
6

Nigeria



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Christians suffer from a suffocating combination of *Islamic oppression*, *ethno-religious hostility*, *dictatorial paranoia* and *organized corruption and crime*. The government has failed to prevent an increase in Islamic militant violence, much of which takes place in the north, in the form of attacks by Boko Haram and their splinter group ISWAP (Islamic State in West Africa Province), as well as by Fulani militants and other armed bandits. Such violence often causes loss of life, physical injury, rape, abduction, loss of property, and destruction of farmlands. Christians are especially affected and are being dispossessed of their land and means of livelihood. Many live as internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees.

Christians in northern Nigeria, especially in the Sharia states, face discrimination and exclusion as second-class citizens. Christians with a Muslim background also face rejection from their own families,

pressure to give up Christianity, and often physical violence. In recent years, violence has increased and spilled into southern states, which heightens the sense of insecurity and the level of impunity. President Muhammadu Buhari has increasingly positioned Muslims in the most important government roles, which makes it harder for Christians who have suffered human rights violations to speak out. Attacked Christian communities are often abandoned by the security forces, which are under federal command. Religiously-motivated violence is taking place against a backdrop of climate change and environmental degradation, pushing the Fulani herdsman and their cattle southwards and putting stress on herder-farmer relationships.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Muhammadu Buhari

POPULATION

216,747,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

100,420,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christians 46.3%, Muslims 46.3%

GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	100,420,000	46.3
Muslims	100,369,000	46.3
Ethno-religionists	15,217,000	7.0
Agnostics	551,000	0.3

Source²

Having gained independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria's democratic transition did not occur until 1999, when 16 years of military rule ended. Buhari, from All Progressives Congress (APC), became president in 2015 and was controversially re-elected in February 2019 amid electoral violence and arbitrary rules made by the Electoral Commission in support of President Buhari.

Nigeria has the largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa. However, poverty is widespread and 40% of the population live below the poverty line. Northern Nigeria is severely underdeveloped compared to the south. Corruption is rampant and a point of contention is the distribution of revenues received from oil.

18% of girls are married before their 15th birthday. The Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 is Nigeria's first criminal legislation that recognizes a broad spectrum of violence, particularly against women and girls, but is yet to be adopted by several Sharia-run northern states. (PWAN 2022). Domestic violence within marriages is widespread; in the Islamic northern region, husbands are permitted to discipline their wives so long as no "grievous" bodily harm is caused (CEDAW 2017).

Human rights violations are carried out by numerous groups. In the north, Boko Haram has carried out a systematic campaign against the Nigerian state, proclaiming an Islamic caliphate in Borno State in

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

2014. Boko Haram specifically targets Christians, abducting and killing males and abducting, raping and forcibly marrying females as part of the mission to depopulate Christian-dominated territories. Boko Haram leader Shekau died in May 2021, but that has not diminished any activities. Similar violence is carried out by ISWAP, who also pledge allegiance to Islamic State. Fulani militants attack predominantly Christian villages in several northern states, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands. The violence has rapidly expanded further south. Other armed bandits are also responsible for violence in northern states where they rape, kill, kidnap and burn property. Christians are disproportionately affected by these armed bandits, raising the question as to what extent there is an informal alliance between Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants, and/ or these armed bandits.

In December 2020, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court called for a formal inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity, in which she implicated not only non-state actors but also members of the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF). Under her successor, there has not been ostensible progress to date.

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian (71% Christian), while Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim (25% Christian). The religious divide partly coincides with the ethnic divide. The Hausa-Fulani

in the north are predominantly Muslim, the Igbo in the south-east are mainly Christian, while the Yoruba in the south-west have both a significant Muslim and Christian population. Though according to its Constitution Nigeria is a secular state, for decades the northern ruling elite has discriminated against Christians in favor of Muslims. Since 1999, Sharia law has been established in 12 northern states.

How the situation varies by region

The situation has become very problematic for all civilians, particularly Christians. Nigeria has six geopolitical zones. Each zone had its own profile of hostilities against Christians (and others). Violence in the north-east was mainly perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISWAP. In the north-west there were armed bandits. In the north-central, including Kaduna State, there were Fulani militants. Violence is no longer limited to the three northern geopolitical zones, but has already extended into the three southern geopolitical zones. Meanwhile, the circles of influence of these different groups have been increasingly overlapping, apparently including their agendas. It has become increasingly difficult to distinguish which violent group is responsible for which acts, and what the specific identity of a certain group is.



Pastor Andrew and his family had to flee from their home in Monguno, located in far northeast of Nigeria, due to attack by Boko Haram.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not scored separately in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

In Nigeria these include the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations such as Anglicans, Methodists, and Lutherans. These churches face violent attacks against their life and property perpetrated by militant groups and armed bandits and discrimination from the local authorities, especially in the northern states. Violence has also extended into the southern states, as has land grabbing and community intimidation by Fulani militants.

Converts to Christianity

These are mostly converts from Islam. They are often forced to find refuge in “safe houses” due to the danger of severe persecution and killing. Muslim converts to Christianity from northern Nigeria often have to flee their homes and states to escape being killed or harassed. This is less likely to occur in the south, although it happens to a limited degree in south-western areas.

Non-traditional Christian communities

The Evangelical and Pentecostal communities now make up a considerable proportion of the Nigerian Church. In the northern states, the Evangelical and Pentecostal communities face discrimination from the local authorities, as well as violent attacks against their life and property by militant groups and armed bandits. Violence against them has also extended into the southern states.



Pastor Ayuba's two daughters were kidnapped by Boko Haram in April 2014. He still awaits the release of his second daughter.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression, Ethno-religious hostility, Dictatorial paranoia, and Organized corruption and crime:

There is considerable overlap between the sources of religious freedom violations in Nigeria. The 12 northern states are governed by Sharia law and President Buhari, a Fulani himself, arguably uses his position to appoint Muslims to key positions. This fosters in the whole country a culture of impunity where the fundamental rights of non-Muslims are not upheld and where violations against Christians are not addressed. Non-Christian (especially Muslim) religious leaders have encouraged violations against Christians through intolerant ideology and incitement to violence. Radical Islamists such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to target civilians, especially Christians. The same applies for violence committed by Fulani militants. Added to this, there is violence committed by armed bandits. This happens in the northern states and increasingly also in the southern states. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) is an ideological pressure group with powerful patrons, including President Buhari. Other perpetrators include citizen mobs committing street violence against Christians, family members (especially in the context of conversion from Islam to Christianity), political parties and organized crime networks.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Raids by Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and other armed bandits have terrorized Christian communities. Women are raped, sexually enslaved, kidnapped for ransom and killed. Christian girls are abducted by militants and forced into marriages as a depopulating tactic. In addition to being “married”, girls abducted by militants have reportedly been used as suicide bombers or as fighters. When women are raped, their husbands sometimes find it difficult to move past the trauma and may view their wife as tarnished. Women are also vulnerable to sexual violence in IDP camps.

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town / country
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men and boys are often targeted and killed by actors including Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants, and other armed bandits. This eliminates the current generation of males, but also guarantees that the birthrate of Christian families will fall. Survivors and young boys face forced inclusion in militant ranks. Christian men have also been strategically marginalized in terms of employment and education. If a man is killed, loses his job, or has his property seized, his dependent family can become impoverished.

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Incarceration by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	6	88
2022	7	87
2021	9	85
2020	12	80
2019	12	80

The violence score was once again at the maximum level. Christians continued to be attacked indiscriminately and brutally in northern Nigeria, and the violence spread to southern Nigeria. The prevalence of militant groups in Nigeria has made life unsafe for Nigerians and Christians in particular. Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants, and other armed bandits have conducted raids on Christian communities during which people have been killed, maimed, raped, kidnapped for ransom, or forced into sexual slavery. Churches have been closed down, houses and fields destroyed or confiscated. Many people have been forced into internal displacement or have become refugees. In addition to this, there is also the situation of increasing Islamization which has been causing serious pressure on Christians in their everyday lives, especially in the northern parts of the country. Since the government has persisted in its official position of denial of religious persecution, violations of Christians' rights have been carried out with impunity.



Yana Gana's daughters are still held captive by Boko Haram.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- 12 May 2022:** A female Christian student at Shehu Shagari College of Education in the Sokoto State was murdered in cold blood by classmates. It happened on 12 May 2022, following a WhatsApp comment considered to be an insult against Islam ([BBC News, 14 May 2022](#)). The stoning and burning of the Christian girl, Deborah Yakubu, at the college gates was also captured on video and shared on social media. Although the mob-killing was condemned by some leading Muslims, riots broke out in Sokoto with armed Muslim protestors demanding the release of the two suspected ringleaders who were arrested by the police and charged with “criminal conspiracy and inciting public disturbance” ([Sahara Reporters, 16 May 2022](#)).
- 5 June 2022:** An armed group burst into a Roman Catholic Church, in Owo, Ondo State, during a Pentecost Sunday service, killing worshipers over a period of 20-30 minutes with explosives and gunfire ([BBC News, 6 June 2022](#)). Reports put the number of Christians killed at 40, with at least 60 wounded ([Pulse NG, 23 June 2022](#)).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians abducted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2023	5014	4726	10,000*	10,000*
2022	4650	2510	10,000*	10,000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

Converts to Christianity from Islam in northern Nigeria (including parts of the south) often have to flee to escape being harassed or killed by their family and the community. Anything that reveals their Christian faith is risky. For non-convert Christians, their name can identify their faith. A person’s name can mean life or death during raids by violent Islamic groups. Living in a (mainly) Christian community in the rural areas of many states is also very risky and leads to high levels of fear. The same applies for many Christians living as IDPs in an unsafe environment.

Family life

Christians face several challenges in family life, especially in the northern states (including parts of the south). Converts from Islam fear discovery of their new faith by their families, which could mean loss of child custody or needing to flee their home. When Christian women are widowed, Muslim relatives sometimes take the children to raise them as Muslims. It is difficult for Christian parents to raise their children in accordance with their faith in IDP camps.



Rabo’s husband was killed in a Boko Haram attack. Today, as a result of Open Door’s support, her children are in school and she owns a restaurant.

Community life

In northern Nigeria (including parts of the South), people with an English or biblical name often face discrimination in schools, hospitals and in the workplace. In Muslim-dominated areas, Christians are seen as infidels and harassed. Men may even be detained for having an “immoral hair cut”. Ruling emirs are sometimes complicit in the abductions of Christian girls for forced marriage. Government amenities do not reach Christian communities as much as they ought. In some rural areas, Christians have been denied water and have had to walk for hours to get it. Even in cities, the Christian quarters are sometimes denied amenities such as sanitation services. More is invested in the infrastructure of Muslim-majority areas than in Christian-majority areas. Among IDPs, Christians are often left out of the distribution of relief.

National life

Easy accusations of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion are forcing Christians to be very careful in discussions with Muslims, as their words can easily be used against them. Christians have been killed on the spot when they were accused of speaking ill of Muhammad or Islam. The case of Deborah Yakubu in Sokoto State is a clear illustration of this. In general, there is a climate of impunity; those who attack Christians and their properties are hardly ever arrested. However, Christians have served prison sentences for crimes for which a Muslim is easily discharged or not charged at all. At times, Christians are charged in Sharia courts, which have no jurisdiction over them. Their evidence is worth half that of a Muslim. Although the Constitution recognizes the right to freedom of religion or belief, Sharia law (adopted in 12 northern states) supersedes this. The media often reports attacks on Christian communities as “communal clashes”. Muslim-owned media outfits can under-report or distort attacks against Christians by Muslims.

Church life

In northern Nigeria, churches are destroyed and church leaders (sometimes with their families) are abducted or executed. The same happens to many other Christians. Church activities are monitored, obstructed or hindered. Christians are also denied land for building churches. Openly integrating Muslim converts could provoke violence against the church and its property, so many converts move to safe locations elsewhere in Nigeria. Insecurity has spread to southern Nigeria too. In an atmosphere of chaos and impunity, speaking out against the human rights violations of Christians and other Nigerians is risky.

International obligations & rights violated

Nigeria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CAT\)](#)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#)

Nigeria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- The state is manifestly failing to protect Nigerian Christians' fundamental rights (ICCPR Art. 2)
- Christians are murdered in indiscriminate attacks (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians women are raped, gang raped, and sexually abused (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christian children are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts in the northern states (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Converts to Christianity suffer from discrimination and violence in the northern states and several southern states (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- In January, March, and May, protesters marching for the release of Sheikh El Zakzaky, calling themselves the Free Zakzaky movement, clashed with security forces. The non-governmental organization (NGO) Shia Rights Watch stated that government security forces opened fire on Free Zakzaky protesters on May 7. On September 28, Islamic Movement Nigeria (IMN) members and security forces clashed again in Abuja during IMN's annual march coinciding with the Shia Muslim Arbæeen religious observance.
- In February, Kano State authorities banned well known Muslim cleric Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara from preaching following complaints from the Kano Ulama Council that his sermons would disturb the peace. In July, after he participated in a televised, three-hour debate in which he expounded on his religious views, Kano State authorities detained Nasiru-Kabara on charges of blasphemy.
- In June, authorities filed 10 criminal charges against Humanist Association of Nigeria president and former Muslim Mubarak Bala on counts of making statements calculated to cause a breach of public peace by insulting religion. After Bala posted statements on Facebook that state officials in Kano called "inflammatory and disparaging" towards Islam, police arrested him at his home in Kaduna State in April 2020 and transferred him to Kano State, where authorities imprisoned him without charge.
- In July, authorities detained three visiting Israeli filmmakers for 20 days. They were making a documentary about Nigerian Jews in the south-east region and were suspected of supporting the Indigenous People of Biafra, a group the government outlawed for its stated aims of seeking the separation of the south-east region from the country, the leaders of which professed a connection to Judaism. Authorities released them without charge.



Believers leaving a church service.

Open Doors in Nigeria

Open Doors has been involved in Nigeria since the early 1990s. Our programs include training and education, legal assistance to persecuted Christians and churches, trauma counselling and emergency relief.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
