



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: ETHNONATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

June 2023

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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.

Introduction

Nigeria is home to a plethora of armed actors committing violence with [*dire implications*](#) for religious freedom. In several regions of the country assailants have targeted ethnoreligious minorities as well as houses of worship and religious ceremonies with violence. In some areas, armed actors include ethnonationalist militias seeking to wrest territorial control from government authority.

Ethnonationalist fighters in Nigeria have politicized religion and attacked civilians based on ethnoreligious identity. These fighters commit some of the most egregious atrocities and human rights violations of any actors in the country. This is particularly true in northcentral Nigeria, where ethnonationalist fighters affiliated with the predominantly Muslim Fulani community attack vulnerable Christian civilians with impunity. Additionally in southeast Nigeria, ethnonationalist fighters affiliated with the predominantly Christian Igbo community have at times targeted Muslim civilians as a part of their campaign to secede. In both northern and southeast Nigeria, ethnonationalist fighters have been implicated in attacks against both Muslim and Christian worshippers.

This report highlights ethnonationalist violence in Nigeria and its implications for religious freedom. It also highlights the government's disparate and ineffective approaches to curtailing violence by these groups, which have led to widespread impunity for violence, including violence against religious communities.

Background

Nigeria, a democratic and Africa's most populous country, demonstrates tremendous ethnic and religious diversity. The predominantly Christian Igbo and the multifaith Yoruba groups in the south and the predominantly Muslim Hausa and Fulani groups in the north make up more than half of the country's population, with more than 300 smaller groups comprising the remaining populace. Members of Nigerian civil society often take pride in Nigeria's ethnic diversity and efforts to champion social harmony across ethnoreligious groups.

However, the Nigerian government's weakness and failures have contributed to a hardening of discourse concerning ethnicity, including exclusionary sentiment. Nigerian government officials have failed to address perceptions of bias and equitably prioritize the needs of individuals confronted by significant economic, social, and ecological shocks. Some authorities [*actively employ hate speech*](#) in their campaigns and political strategies. With many Nigerians feeling abandoned by government institutions in the face of severe hardship, ethnonationalism is [*on the rise*](#). Several vocal political actors and [*movements*](#) seek to supplant existing government authority and establish governance mechanisms that better protect the interest of their ethnic group.

Political opinion in Nigeria is incredibly complex. Not all members of a specific ethnic group feel marginalized by the state or advocate for significant reform. Among those who do, not all of them support the creation of alternative states that afford disproportionate or exclusive authority to a particular ethnic group. Even within groups that support ethno-supremacist governing alternatives, many do not advocate violent means for achieving these objectives. However, vocal advocates for violently achieving ethnic supremacy are present in particular regions of Nigeria and pose significant threats to religious freedom for many Nigerians across the country. These actors both actively instigate violence against other ethno-religious groups and against worshippers, as well as contribute to a breakdown of law and order that allows other armed actors, like criminals, militant Islamists, and self-defense vigilantes, to target worshippers.

Ethnonationalism in Northcentral Nigeria

Ethnonationalist groups fighting for greater power for ethnic Fulani operate in northcentral and northwest Nigeria and overwhelmingly target civilians with violence. In northcentral Nigeria especially, Christians represent [the majority](#) of victims of this violence.

A predominantly Muslim ethnic group, Fulani also have experienced [significant persecution](#) and statelessness across West Africa for several decades. A primarily pastoralist community, Fulani represent one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. In recent decades, Fulani in Nigeria have expressed a growing sense of disenfranchisement in the country, as they have elsewhere in West Africa. The sense of marginalization among Fulani communities in Nigeria stems primarily from federal and state government [preference](#) for developing the agriculture sector over the livestock sector, especially in the face of ecological shocks and growing resource competition. Government authorities have also failed to curb the [flow of weapons](#) and [protect pastoralists' property](#) in the face of [growing criminality](#)—a grievance felt by members of other ethnic groups and livelihoods as well.

With leadership decentralized, the objectives of armed actors fighting for Fulani ethnic empowerment in northcentral Nigeria are difficult to discern. Evidence suggests that some of these fighters seek to establish an ethno-state affording governing power disproportionately or exclusively to Fulani elites. These militias take advantage of state absence and poor security performance to attack and displace civilians, overwhelmingly targeting Christian communities in northcentral Nigeria. Conscripting from predominantly pastoralist communities, these ethnonationalist militias

benefit from pastoralists' physical stamina, terrain knowledge, military culture, and availability of arms to conduct asymmetric warfare, resulting in some of the [highest casualty attacks](#) in the country.

In June 2022, gunmen [killed 35 people](#) in several attacks on predominantly Christian communities in the Kajuru region of Kaduna State, including attacks on churches. In January 2023, armed fighters killed eight civilians, beheading some of them, in an attack on an [internally displaced persons camp](#) in a region where many Christians have been displaced by violence. In April, assailants [killed 47 civilians](#) in an attack on Umogidi, a predominantly Catholic village in northcentral Benue State. In May, armed attacks reportedly targeting Christian communities killed [more than 100 people](#) over the course of several days.

Many of these armed actors also operate in northwest Nigeria and have shown disdain for religious freedom by considering worshippers as legitimate targets for violence to advance their aims. In September 2022, gunmen [killed 15 worshippers](#) in an attack on a mosque during Friday prayers in Zamfara State. In December, armed assailants killed 25 worshippers in two attacks on mosques in [Katsina State](#) and [Niger State](#), both taking place during Friday prayers. In January 2023, gunmen attacked a Catholic church in Katsina and [killed 25 worshippers](#), while others [burned a Catholic priest](#) to death when they set his house on fire in Niger State.

Ethnonationalists in northcentral Nigeria share the landscape with many other armed actors, including criminal gangs, self-defense militias, and militant Islamist groups. Given this complex array of armed actors and the lack of government investigation into violent incidents, discerning the perpetrator of any individual attack often proves difficult. However, ethnonationalist armed groups operate in the region, are well armed, and frequently show disdain for human rights. These groups are likely responsible for significant attacks against Christian communities in northcentral Nigeria. They may also bear some responsibility for attacks on both Christian and Muslim worshippers in northwest Nigeria.

In the face of catastrophic violence against civilians, government response has been insufficient to meet its obligations to ensure security and justice for victims, especially in northcentral Nigeria. Communities allege that government security forces deliberately avoid responding to warnings of violence until after attacks have taken place. When they do respond, Christian civilians have reported in several instances that security forces responded with stronger force to alerts of impending violence against Muslim communities

than against Christian communities, raising questions of institutional bias. Local authorities have made no discernable efforts to communicate with civilians to address these perceptions or build trust with local communities. Local politicians reportedly exploit interethnic tensions to advance their political agendas. In the absence of strong federal response, some state and local officials [call](#) for civilians to take up arms and defend themselves, leading to militarization of identity groups and increases in human rights abuses [associated](#) with poorly trained vigilante groups operating with little-to-no accountability.

Ethnonationalism in Southeast Nigeria

Ethnonationalists fighting for greater power for ethnic Igbo operate in southeast Nigeria. Unlike ethnonationalist fighters in northcentral Nigeria, ethnonationalists in southeast Nigeria primarily attack political targets, including state authorities and infrastructure. However, these fighters have been known to attack and incite violence against religious minorities and sometimes consider worshippers as legitimate targets for violence.

Igbo comprise a predominantly Christian ethnic group, although Igbo identity also encompasses several notable Muslim and [Jewish communities](#). Many Igbo have felt significant marginalization and been dissatisfied with their level of representation in Nigerian politics for many decades. These sentiments date back to the unsuccessful secession attempt revolutionaries in the southeast made during the bloody [Nigerian civil war](#) half a century ago. Igbo communities feel particularly underrepresented within government and security force institutions, in part due to [quota systems](#) for state revenue distribution and public sector employment that privilege the comparatively more populous north and southwest of the country. Broader lack of advancement opportunities for middle class youth compounds this sense of systematic injustice.

Recent iterations of ethnonationalist sentiment in southeast Nigeria largely stem from political roots. Shortly after Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) emerged calling for an independent state in southeast Nigeria to achieve stronger justice for Igbo Nigerians. In 2012, Nnamdi Kanu and Uche Mefor founded the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a political movement advocating for southeast secession building on 20th century Igbo independence movements. In 2020, Kanu established an armed wing, the [Eastern Security Network \(ESN\)](#) that, in addition to attacking government officials and security forces, began to harass and intimidate civilians who did

not support ethnonationalist agendas. The militarization triggered fissures among IPOB leadership and other broad movements fighting for autonomy and political enfranchisement for Igbo Nigerians.

While most violence in southeast Nigeria targets political targets, armed actors in the region have at times engaged in violence against civilians and have politicized religion and targeted civilians based on ethnoreligious identity. Some ethnonationalist advocates have used social media to [incite violence](#) against minorities from northern, predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, using local languages deliberately to [avoid hate speech detection](#). In May 2022, armed assailants [murdered](#) a pregnant Muslim Hausa woman and her four children, drawing ire from Muslim and Christian organizations. In 2022 gunmen [attacked a cattle](#) market in Abia, Taraba State, killing at least eight Fulani Muslim civilians.

Armed actors in the southeast, often unidentified by reports, have also [targeted Christian and traditional worshippers](#) with violence as a part of their military activities. In some regions, armed men have usurped government and traditional rulers and now forcibly regulate marriage and burial ceremonies. Some Christians report feeling too afraid to celebrate religious holidays publicly following the arrival of armed actors. Armed assailants abducted a Christian Nigerian army officer traveling to visit her grandmother for the Christmas holiday, released a video tape of her bound and naked on social media, and threatened to kill her. Another soldier traveling in the region to her traditional marriage ceremony was abducted and beheaded on video.

As is the case elsewhere in Nigeria, ethnonationalist fighters in the southeast operate in a security landscape that includes armed criminal actors and self-defense forces. With government justice and investigation efforts lacking, identifying the perpetrator of any specific incident of violence is often difficult. However, armed ethnonationalists operate in the region and have likely conducted some attacks that threaten religious minorities and worshippers in the region.

Nigerian government response in the southeast contrasts with that in northcentral region. Government actors have taken an overly political and militarized approach to curtailing ethnonationalist violence in the southeast. Unlike in northcentral, the federal government views ethnonationalism in the southeast as a threat to its control and reportedly feels justified in using [any means](#) to eradicate it. The government designated IPOB a terrorist organization, curtailing political discourse surrounding legitimate grievances and enforcing

problematic aspects of the [Terrorism Prevention Act](#). Security forces and state-backed vigilantes have committed [significant human rights abuses](#) in their response to violence in the southeast, including killing civilians, conducting mass arrests, exerting excessive and unlawful use of force, and employing torture and other ill treatment. Many assess that these abuses have strengthened local support for ethnonationalist movements, eroding the trust of civilians who did not previously support secession. These abuses have had direct impacts on worshippers, as evidenced by state-backed vigilantes [killing five men](#) returning from a wedding in Imo State in July 2022.

Conclusion

The Nigerian government's failure to meet the needs of its people and address allegations of institutional bias have contributed to growing ethnonationalist sentiment in many regions of the country. Given that ethnicity and religion often intersect significantly for most Nigerian communities, this phenomenon has problematic implications for freedom of religion or belief for many Nigerians.

In northcentral Nigeria, ethnonationalists fighting to promote Fulani interests target Christian civilians based on ethnoreligious identity and are among the armed actors that attack worshippers in their military pursuits there and elsewhere in northern Nigeria. In southeast Nigeria, armed separatists defending Igbo interests target Muslim civilians based on ethnoreligious identity and have also attacked individuals of various faiths traveling to worship and celebrate holidays in the region.

In both regions, the Nigerian government's response has aggravated violence rather than contributed to justice. In northcentral Nigeria, government apathy in the face of violence has resulted in mass atrocities and the erosion of civilian trust in government institutions. In southeast Nigeria, the government's overly militarized approach yielded human rights abuses, aggravating ethnic grievances against the state and fueling ethnonationalist sentiment.

Ethnonationalist violence presents one of the largest threats to religious freedom in Nigeria. The Nigerian government has failed to address the drivers of this violence and prioritize justice for its victims. The U.S. government must designate Nigeria a country of particular concern (CPC) for tolerating as well as engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the State Department should designate a Special Envoy to Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region to address religious freedom challenges there.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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