

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria trended negatively in 2018. The Nigerian government at the national and state levels continued to tolerate violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and suppressed the freedom to manifest religion or belief. Religious sectarian violence increased during the year, with Muslims and Christians attacked based on their religious and ethnic identity. The Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetrators accountable. Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to perpetrate attacks against civilians and the military throughout the year, despite the government's claims of progress in defeating them. In addition, members of the military and the civilian joint task force, a local vigilante group supporting official forces, were accused of human rights violations against civilians displaced by conflict. The Nigerian military and government continued to violate the religious freedom and human rights of the Shi'a members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Al

Zakzaky remained in detention, along with his wife and hundreds of other members; state governments continued to ban the group's activities; and in October 2018, soldiers and police reportedly killed more than 45 IMN members during religious processions and protests in Abuja. Finally, other religious freedom abuses continued at the state level, including coercive official or societal actions to enforce particular religious norms. USCIRF delegations visited Nigeria in May and November 2018 to examine religious freedom concerns.

Based on continued systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF again finds that Nigeria merits designation in 2019 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009. The U.S. Department of State has never designated Nigeria as a CPC, but in 2017 and 2018 designated Boko Haram as an Entity of Particular Concern, or EPC, for its particularly severe religious freedom violations as defined by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Nigerian government, and provide associated financial and technical support to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
 - Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs;
 - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on international human rights standards, including countering hate speech based on religious identity; responding to sectarian violence; reporting on violence against Muslim and Christian communities; and ensuring security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable;
- Allocate funding through the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, or U.S. Department of Defense for programs to train and equip officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites; and
- Increase conflict resolution programming and research—in partnership with local and traditional leaders and other parts of civil society—to counter hate speech and incitement to violence based on religious identity;
- Press the Nigerian government to acknowledge the significant threats posed by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, to prioritize greater support to both military and nonmilitary efforts to counter the insurgency, and to protect the rights of the Nigerian press to report on the continuing war;
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to discuss further actions to end sectarian violence, address land and water concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities; and
- Urge the Nigerian government to pursue justice for IMN members, allow U.S. Embassy officials to meet with detained IMN leader Sheikh Al Zakzaky, review all cases of detained IMN members and release those held wrongfully or without charge, and develop an independent judicial commission of inquiry (COI) to investigate the Nigerian security forces' killing of IMN members in October 2018.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Federal Republic of Nigeria

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

203,452,505

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

N/A

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

51.6% Muslim (majority Sunni; also Sufi orders, Shi'a, and other sects and approaches to Islam)

11.2% Roman Catholic

35.7% Other Christian (including Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, The Church of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other denominations)

1.5% Indigenous beliefs, Other, or Unspecified (including Jews, Baha'is, atheists, and other beliefs)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the State Department. Population statistics are highly controversial and disputed in Nigeria.

BACKGROUND

Nigeria has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world and the largest economy in Africa. Its population includes more than 300 ethnic and linguistic groups, with the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo representing a majority. The religions and beliefs practiced in Nigeria are highly diverse, although historically the population has been about evenly divided between the largely Muslim north and more Christian south. Other groups include atheists, Baha'is, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and indigenous traditions that may incorporate other religious practices; however, USCIRF observed a low level of awareness among interlocutors of such smaller religious communities. Smaller religious communities and human rights groups report that the dominant two religions suppress other beliefs and practices, including the widespread syncretic traditions in the country.

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria includes provisions protecting freedom of religious belief and prohibiting religious discrimination, and there is no official state religion. However, in 12 Muslim-majority northern Nigerian states, federalism has allowed the adoption of Islamic Shari'ah law in the criminal codes. The Nigerian constitution also establishes the roles of customary law and Shari'ah courts for Islamic personal law, family

law issues, and other areas as may be determined by the state. Religious police, which are sometimes state funded, are also used to enforce Shari'ah, often focusing on family issues and "moral" behavior.

For decades, the Nigerian government has struggled to manage conflict resulting from competition between groups over political access, land rights, and fears that one ethnic or religious group will dominate another. When the government in 1996 established the Federal Character Commission, it intended the body to enforce the country's "federal character" principle. While this principle was intended to be helpful and protective, it is applied through a controversial "indigene" concept, whereby certain groups are considered native to a particular area ("indigenes") and others nonnative ("settlers"); indigenes often are afforded more benefits and privileges, and settlers have been denied equal citizenship rights. Additionally, across Nigeria traditional rulers and religious leaders wield significant influence in politics and governance. For example, religious leaders may advise politicians or attempt to influence who contests elections. Religious and traditional leaders are some of the most highly respected individuals in society and can also influence followers to support different policies and candidates.

Sectarian violence between rural farmer and herder communities is prevalent in more than a dozen states, primarily in the broadly defined “Middle Belt” region of the country. Ethnic and religious identity—and consequently ethnic and religious conflict—are often intertwined, especially when the majority of one ethnic group practices the same religion (Fulani, for example, are predominantly Muslim and are often identified with both markers). The dynamic of the religious and ethnic violence—and where and how religion and ethnicity overlap—is highly localized. Inflammatory media reports that generalize the parties to a conflict or polarize people along ethnic and religious lines have increased tensions. In 2018, rural violence escalated, and violent conflict in urban areas continued. Many community members conveyed that they did not understand the reasons for the escalation in attacks during 2018, citing a history of peaceful living between their communities. Sectarian violence has resulted in mass displacement, destruction of property, and the deaths of thousands.

Attacks by the terrorist groups Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued in spite of the Nigerian government’s progress in its counterinsurgency efforts. Through its violent jihadi-driven campaign in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, since 2009 Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands, kidnapped hundreds, and displaced nearly two million Nigerians. A culture of impunity for perpetrators has been a

major issue in both sectarian violence and violence by security forces against civilians. In camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), the Nigerian military has been accused of human rights violations against civilians. The Nigerian military continued to repress and use excessive force against the IMN.

USCIRF traveled to Nigeria in May and November 2018 to learn from government officials, religious communities, and other civil society members about religious freedom conditions throughout the country as well as sectarian violence in the Middle Belt. A Commissioner-led delegation traveled to Abuja, Jos, and Lagos in November, and USCIRF staff visited Abuja, Kaduna, and

Zaria in May. USCIRF visited sites of religious sectarian violence and places of worship.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Religious Sectarian Violence

Violence targeting groups and individuals due to their religious identity continued in 2018. Across the country, sectarian conflict caused at least 2,000 deaths, with rising numbers of fatalities in Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa, and Nasarawa states in particular. During USCIRF’s visits to Nigeria in 2018, civil society representatives and government officials offered diverse and overlapping reasons for the burgeoning and complex intercommunal violence: religious, ethnic, and tribal identity; clashes between farmer and herder communities; land and water disputes; and longstanding regional, local, and ethnic divisions. Given the myriad ways that religious, ethnic, and tribal identities are intertwined, it can be difficult to determine the basis or catalyst for violence: violence stemming from disputes over land or water, for example, can become immersed in and exacerbate religious difference. Similarly, clashes between farmer and herder communities can also take place

across—or be perceived to be due to—religious and ethnic divides, as herders are primarily Muslim, and farmers Christian.

The violence is exacerbated by the proliferation of and easy access to arms, polarizing media coverage, and

the failure of security services to address the violence effectively and prevent it from recurring. High rates of unemployment and drug use were also identified as contributing factors. During the year, the decline of personal and community security and administration of public affairs presented a serious threat to religious freedom. Both Muslims and Christians stated that they did not feel protected by security services. Police are either unresponsive or untimely in their response, lack capacity, fail to arrest (or prosecute) perpetrators, and do not properly collect data and document incidents of violence or subsequent investigations, nor do they effectively communicate results of investigations to the

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public. Vigilante groups often fill the security gaps. In many cases, the military has deployed to restore order, though troops have faced criticism for using excessive force, harming civilians, fostering mistrust of authorities and among religious groups, and tacitly encouraging vigilante responses. The pervasiveness of vigilante groups and the continuous and disproportionate role of military operations around the country are evidence of a serious need for reform of police and security services. Human rights groups, journalists, and religious communities are often relied upon for documentation. Journalists may report on violent incidents and estimates of deaths, injuries, and property damage, but often do not follow up on arrests and outcomes of trials.

USCIRF gathered information on numerous incidents of religious sectarian violence that occurred in 2018. In an April 24 attack in Benue State, gunmen believed to be Fulani herders attacked a church, killing 19 people, including two priests, and destroyed more than 50 homes. In retaliation, an angry mob reportedly killed 11 Muslims and raided two mosques. In June, suspected Fulani herders killed an estimated 80–200 people in multiple attacks on villages in Plateau State. Also in June, Berom youth reportedly set up checkpoints on the main highway in Plateau State and stopped and killed travelers they believed to be Muslim or Fulani. In July, an unknown ethnic militia reportedly attacked five Fulani communities in Adamawa State. In October, at least 55 people died in clashes between Muslim and Christian youth in Kaduna State.

Christian interlocutors reported ongoing fears that their communities were being targeted in ethnic cleansing campaigns. Religious communities in many areas remain highly polarized.

In some cities, people are afraid to go into neighborhoods of the other religion or refuse to sell land to individuals from the other faith. Civil society members reported to USCIRF an ongoing problem with

hate speech on the basis of religious and ethnic identity, including from clerics and clergy, as well as the spread of misinformation, which at times incites people to violence and reprisals. Numerous nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) have developed radio programs to build trust and dialogue between Muslims and Christians and to encourage young people to use nonviolent methods to resolve issues.

In November 2018, USCIRF visited an Evangelical Church Winning All church building that lies on the border between Muslim and Christian neighborhoods in Jos. Members of the church brigade showed USCIRF fire damage inside the building and described an attack on the church on September 28–29, 2018, in which between 10 and 20 people were killed, allegedly by Muslim youth militia. Following that attack, Muslim community members reported that their houses were attacked and burned on October 1 and 2. The brigade men informed USCIRF that congregants planned to continue worshipping in the church in spite of the ongoing tensions and risks. Following these violent incidents, the Dutse Uku Muslim Community wrote a letter to the Plateau State Police Command complaining that police did not protect them and that Christian militia did further damage in the presence of police.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA

The terrorist group Boko Haram—also known as Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad—and its ISIS-supported faction—known as ISIS-West Africa (WA)—continued to commit attacks in northeast Nigeria in 2018. In 2015, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS. In 2016, Boko Haram split, with one faction supporting Shekau and another supporting Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, whom ISIS endorsed. The Barnawi faction, ISIS-WA, has focused on targeting military forces and bases. Since 2009, Boko Haram has

inflicted mass terror on civilians, killing at least 37,000 Nigerians, kidnapping thousands, and displacing more than two million. The group has killed and harmed people for being “nonbelievers,” including prominent

religious leaders. Civilians have been abducted and subjected to forced marriage, forced conversion, sexual abuse, and torture. Increasingly, Boko Haram has turned to suicide attacks and has used women and children to

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launch them. In May 2018, Boko Haram reportedly conducted twin suicide bombings at a mosque and nearby market in the city of Mubi, killing at least 27 people.

In February 2018, ISIS-WA abducted an estimated 110 schoolgirls from Dapchi, in Yobe State. Five girls died during the abduction. One month later, the remaining girls were released, except for the only reported Christian student, Leah Sharibu. Her freed classmates reported that she was not released because she refused to convert to Islam. As of the end of 2018, Sharibu remained captive. In 2018, the militants executed other female hostages whom they accused of being apostates. Of the 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram from Chibok in 2014, at least 100 girls remain missing, as do an unknown number of other women, girls, and boys kidnapped by the terrorist group. In April 2018, the Nigerian Army reported freeing 149 women and children from a Boko Haram hideout in Borno State.

There was little accountability for human rights violations in the northeast—both by Boko Haram members as well as by the processes used to seek justice. In October 2017 and February 2018, the Nigerian military conducted secret trials of more than 2,300 Boko Haram suspects. According to reports, at least 468 were ordered to participate in deradicalization programs. Human rights groups reported numerous flaws in the justice process, such as witnesses and victims not being permitted to provide testimony and defendants not being allowed access to lawyers. During its November 2018 visit, USCIRF learned that judges generally serve as their own court reporters and take notes by hand, and that criminal justice reform—more broadly—is also needed to better protect religious freedom. In October 2017, the Nigerian Army opened a new office in Maiduguri to deal with military human rights abuses, and reportedly began new human rights protection training in May 2018.

Repression of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria

The IMN, the country's largest Shi'a Muslim group, was formed by Sheikh Zakzaky in the northern city of Zaria in Kaduna State in the 1980s and 1990s. Originally

inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution, and maintaining photos of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in tribute on its website, the IMN also supported the establishment of an Islamic government in Nigeria. The IMN has since become the target of violence by the Nigerian government, which classifies the IMN as a “violent group” and uses excessive force to repress IMN members and activities.

More than three years since the most violent crackdown on the IMN—the December 2015 mass killing and burial of 347 IMN members by the Nigerian Army in Zaria—and despite the 2016 Kaduna State COI finding the army responsible and recommending prosecutions, no Nigerian Army officers have been held to account.

In 2018, Nigerian police continued to detain hundreds of IMN members—including, most prominently, Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife Malama Zeenah Ibrahim, who have been held without charges since December 2015, despite an order from the Federal High Court in Abuja on December 2, 2016, that they be released within 45 days. Authorities arrested at least 15 IMN members in 2018.

Throughout 2018, IMN members staged protests around the country advocating for Sheikh Zakzaky's release. In Kaduna and Sokoto, state-level officials maintained bans on IMN activities, including religious processions. The IMN and news sources reported that force used to disperse protests was at times excessive, causing both injuries and deaths.

Between October 28 and November 1, Shi'a Muslims marched around the country for Arbaeen—an annual religious procession observed by Shi'a Muslims

globally to commemorate the death of Imam Hussein in the seventh century. Hundreds of IMN followers reportedly marched in Abuja both to honor the religious occasion and to protest for Sheikh Zakzaky's release.

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Although the Nigerian Army said protestors threw rocks at security services, there was no evidence of any violent provocation by the IMN. The Nigerian Army fired indiscriminately into crowds, killing at least 45 people, according to human rights groups. There was no official

statement from the Nigerian government condemning this excessive use of force on peaceful protestors. The Nigerian Army initially tweeted a defense of soldiers' actions, but then deleted it.

State-Level Religious Governance and Policing

Twelve states in northern Nigeria are governed by forms of Shari'ah law, and some utilize religious police to supplement the regular police force or provide social services. State enforcement of Shari'ah and the use or funding of religious police (known as *Hisbah*) varies by location, as does public perception of their value or impact. In some states, vigilante or informal police and neighborhood watches, including *Hisbah*, are regulated and defined by law. Some state governments, such as Kano and Zamfara, also fund and equip *Hisbah*. In Plateau and Kaduna states, some neighborhood watch groups are organized along religious lines and have religious leadership. In 2018, *Hisbah* police continued to arrest and detain, seize or destroy the property of, and enforce punishments on individuals who violated local and state religious and morality codes, including arrests for possession and consumption of alcohol. *Hisbah* as well as other police also arrested people on charges of homosexuality, on the basis of religious laws.

Women, Marriage, and Religious Freedom

Women are uniquely impacted by religion-based laws, policing, and discrimination. The revival of Islamic law in 1999 led to both positive and negative impacts on women's rights in the north. In July 2018 in Kano State, *Hisbah* arrested five women for alleged immoral acts. Boko Haram has abducted thousands of women and girls, subjecting them to various forms of violence. Women and girls displaced by conflict continue to report sexual and gender-based violence by security officers in camps.

Some Nigerian religious and traditional beliefs allow, if not encourage, the harmful practice of female

genital mutilation (FGM). According to the United Nations (UN), 25 percent of women and girls aged 15–49 have undergone some form of FGM. FGM is most common in predominantly Christian states in the south but is also practiced by Muslims in the north.

Similarly, religious and traditional beliefs have justified child marriage, and activists have reported fierce opposition from Muslim groups on setting minimum age limits for marriage. According to the UN, [44 percent of Nigerian women between 20 and 24 years old were married before age 18, and 18 percent before age 15](#). Child marriage is particularly prevalent in northern Nigeria. Child marriage remains wide-

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spread despite the fact that the Child Rights Act of 2003 set the minimum age for marriage at 18; many state governments still do not enforce this provision. At the same time, many religious and traditional leaders have opposed child marriage and are fighting to end

it. Polygyny (where a man is married to more than one woman) was reported as common for both Christians and Muslims, and is permitted under common law and Shari'ah law across the country. Under Islamic law, men are limited to marrying up to four wives. Nationally, the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, as well as Shari'ah law, criminalize marriage between persons of the same sex and prohibit places of worship from solemnizing same-sex unions.

During USCIRF's November 2018 visit, interlocutors described issues around religious dress for female Muslim students in the south. In September in Lagos State, five female students were reportedly suspended from school for wearing the hijab.

U.S. POLICY

Nigeria remains a key partner to the United States in Africa and is one of the biggest recipients of assistance in the region. In 2018, U.S. support to Nigeria included essential conflict resolution and violence prevention work, anticorruption efforts, and democracy and governance initiatives, including support of the Independent

National Electoral Commission and international observer missions to bolster the credibility of 2019 general elections. In December 2017, the [U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year \(FY\) 2018](#) included a provision requiring the president to develop a strategy to improve defense institutions and security sector forces in Nigeria; submit to Congress a report assessing the threats from Boko Haram and ISIS-WA and the Nigerian government's efforts to protect civilians and human rights; and present a plan for the United States to work with Nigerian officials to investigate human rights violations by Nigerian security forces and improve detainee conditions. The report, submitted in 2018, thoroughly outlined U.S. support for Nigerian security forces, including in the area of human rights, such as efforts to improve the capacity of newly established human rights desks within the Nigerian Army and to urge accountability for violations against IDPs. The report noted that no army officers have yet been held accountable for the mass killing of IMN members in 2015, but did not identify whether and how the U.S. government has urged accountability for those events.

The U.S. government remains committed to supporting the fight against Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, and is the largest humanitarian donor to the Lake Chad region. In July 2018, U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria W. Stuart Symington [announced](#) an additional \$102 million in humanitarian assistance for populations affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. In FY 2018 the United States provided an estimated \$333 million in humanitarian support in Nigeria as well as broader support in the Lake Chad Basin. The United States has funded radio programs, such as one to counter Boko Haram's ideology and appeal to vulnerable populations. It also continued to provide funding to the regional Multi-National Joint Task Force to combat Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin. In November 2018, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [redesignated](#) Boko Haram as an EPC under IRFA. It had been previously [designated](#) by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT) in 2013. In February 2018, the State Department [designated](#) ISIS-WA as SDGT and an FTO.