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Interfaith Relations and Religious Freedom in Nigeria

Nigeria is the world's sixth most populous country, with approximately 220 million people. Its population is highly diverse, encompassing hundreds of ethno-linguistic groups. There are no official data on religious affiliation in Nigeria, but its population is estimated to be fairly evenly split between Muslims and Christians; Muslims are a majority in the north and Christians a majority in the south, although there are large Christian communities in the north and vice versa. Intrareligious diversity is extensive, encompassing Sunni, Shia, heterodox, and non-sect specific Islam and a wide spectrum of Protestant, Catholic, and non-denominational Christianity. Some Nigerians follow Indigenous faith practices, alone or in combination with Christianity or Islam; others claim no religious affiliation.

While Nigeria's faith communities have often coexisted peacefully, religious affairs are sensitive, state persecution on religious grounds has been an enduring problem, and interfaith relations at times flare up and lead to violence. Each year since 2009, the congressionally mandated U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has called on the State Department to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA, P.L. 105-292). Oversight of IRFA determinations are a potential issue for Congress, as are the implications of threats to religious freedom for U.S.-Nigeria policy and aid. Some Members of Congress, religious freedom advocates, and State Department reports on international religious freedom have cited a number of concerns in Nigeria, including:

Sharia Law. Nigeria has a hybrid legal system that blends common and statutory law, customary law (based on mores in particular ethnic communities), and, in the north, sharia, or Islamic law (see map). There are separate courts for each branch of law; civil courts have appellate jurisdiction over customary and sharia courts at the federal and state levels.

Figure 1. States in which Sharia Courts Operate



Source: CRS, with data from the U.S. Department of State and ESRI.

The jurisdiction of sharia courts was limited to personal matters until 1999, when several state governments in the north introduced sharia criminal codes, alongside Islamic policies and institutions. The extension of sharia appeared popular in parts of the north, but spurred protests and clashes in some areas with larger Christian populations.

Sharia courts legally may not compel participation by non-Muslims, though non-Muslims can elect to have cases tried in sharia courts; some report a preference for sharia courts, describing them as more efficient and less corrupt than civil courts. Nonetheless, USCIRF assesses that Christians, Shia Muslims—a minority in Nigeria's largely Sunni north—and atheists and have faced discrimination and violations of religious freedom in the course of sharia implementation, including abuses by hisbah associations, which enforce sharia. Blasphemy is illegal under sharia and customary law, and courts in both systems have charged and convicted people of blasphemy, including at least three convictions in 2020-2022. Such cases are often widely publicized and highly charged; appellate courts have overturned several blasphemy convictions on appeal, or vacated the most severe sentences. (There also have been instances of mob violence following blasphemy allegations; see below.)

Anti-Shia Repression. Nigeria's minority Shia community, which is concentrated in the northwest, has faced state repression and social discrimination. Many Shia belong to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a group led by outspoken cleric Ibrahim Zakzaky, a longtime critic of the Nigerian government. Observers have repeatedly accused security forces of using excessive force to disperse IMN gatherings. In 2015, for instance, the military reportedly killed nearly 350 IMN members and arrested Zakzaky and hundreds of others after a confrontation during an IMN procession. Security forces reportedly killed dozens during IMN protests calling for Zakzaky's release. In 2021, a state civil court acquitted Zakzaky of all charges in the matter.

Intercommunal conflict. In the north, allegations of blasphemy have, in some cases, resulted in lynchings and other violence. In May 2022, for instance, a mob lynched a Christian college student, Deborah Samuel, for allegedly blaspheming against Islam in a WhatsApp message to fellow students. Attackers have seldom faced arrest or prosecution following religiously motivated mob violence.

Intercommunal conflicts in Nigeria have often played out along sectarian lines, even if not always rooted in religious disagreements. The "Middle Belt," an ethno-religiously diverse region in central Nigeria where religious affiliation and ethnic identity often overlap, has seen repeated clashes between Muslims and Christians, at times sparked by blasphemy allegations or other religiously charged events.

Such violence has often coincided with disputes between “Indigenes”—those officially recognized as native to an area, who are afforded preferential access to employment, education, and political representation—and “settlers,” who are considered non-native and are subject to discrimination regardless of (at times generational) length of residency.

The Middle Belt also has been the site of violence between predominately Muslim, ethnic Fulani herders and Christian farmers of various ethnic groups. Many analysts primarily attribute such conflicts to disputes over control of resources pitting “Indigene” ethnic groups against “settler” Fulani. Others, including religious freedom advocates and some Members of Congress, describe sectarian tensions as a main driver of violence. Attackers have abducted and killed Christian clergy and worshipers and destroyed churches. In the northern Middle Belt and in Nigeria’s northwest, where herders and farmers alike are largely Muslim, gunmen have attacked Muslim leaders and congregations and destroyed mosques. Authorities rarely identify or arrest perpetrators; impunity has spurred vigilantism and reprisal killings.

Islamist Extremism. Pursuant to IRFA, the State Department has designated Nigerian-origin Islamist extremist group Boko Haram and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA), as “entities of particular concern” for committing “particularly severe” religious freedom violations. Boko Haram leaders have preached a radical form of Salafist Sunni Islam, rejecting Western influence, Christianity, and more moderate forms of Islam. The group has threatened and killed Christians and Muslims and attacked places of worship. IS-WA split from Boko Haram citing, in part, objections to the practice of killing Muslims, and has generally focused attacks on state targets and Christians.

Many victims of two high-profile mass kidnappings by the groups—Boko Haram’s abduction of 276 girls from Chibok in 2014 and IS-WA’s abduction of 110 girls from Dapchi in 2018—were Christian. Kidnappers reportedly forced some Chibok abductees to convert to Islam; all of those abducted in Dapchi have escaped or been released except a Christian whom IS-WA reportedly has kept due to her refusal to convert. The kidnappings have attracted sustained attention from Congress; in the 117th Congress, H.Res. 319 would mark the seventh anniversary of the Chibok attack.

U.S. Responses and Issues for Congress
CPC and Special Watch List Designations. As noted above, USCIRF has called for Nigeria’s designation of Nigeria as CPC under IRFA, most recently in 2022. In 2020, for the first time, the Trump Administration named Nigeria a CPC. According to USCIRF, Nigeria was the first secular democracy to be so designated. CPC designations can result in punitive actions (e.g., foreign aid cuts), though these are often waived or excepted; the Administration waived any such measures for Nigeria, citing U.S. interest.

In 2021, the Biden Administration upgraded Nigeria to the “Special Watch List” under IRFA, as amended, determining that Nigeria had engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom but had not met criteria for designation as a CPC. Many religious freedom advocacy groups expressed

dismay over Nigeria’s de-listing as a CPC, which USCIRF described as “unexplainable.” Some Members of Congress criticized the removal and have called for the country’s re-designation in 2022. (CPC determinations typically are issued in November.)

Foreign Assistance. Congress authorizes, appropriates, and oversees U.S. assistance. The U.S. Agency for International Development has administered several projects to promote intercultural understanding and conflict resolution in the Middle Belt, particularly between farmers and herders.

Selected Considerations and Options. Threats to religious freedom in Nigeria stem partly from state discrimination and persecution and partly from the state’s failure to protect local faith communities from threats posed by non-state actors (e.g., Boko Haram, IS-WA, and communal militias). Policymakers may debate the relative merit and effectiveness of punitive actions, such as foreign aid restrictions or sanctions, vis-à-vis measures that seek to build the capacity of the Nigerian state to respond to violence that threatens freedom of religion. Where threats to religious freedom result from communal violence, as in the Middle Belt, U.S. policymakers may debate the relative importance of religious divisions vis-à-vis other factors in sparking and sustaining such conflicts, and consider the appropriate mix and emphasis of various policy responses.

That religious matters in Nigeria are socially and politically delicate, with religious tensions prone to rapid escalation, may raise additional considerations related to the potential unintended consequences of U.S. policy responses. Some observers have voiced concern that U.S. public statements related to such highly charged issues as sharia rulings may inflame religious sensibilities and provoke local backlash. Conversely, USCIRF and other religious freedom groups, have pushed for public expressions of concern in response to religious freedom violations to signal U.S. attentiveness, disapproval, or solidarity with those affected.

Congress may consider whether or not to apply various tools in response to interreligious conflict and religious freedom violations in Nigeria. Members may, for instance:

- Conduct hearings, briefings, and/or fact-finding trips to examine interreligious violence and religious freedom violations in Nigeria and assess U.S. policy responses.
- Demonstrate concern or exercise oversight through correspondence with executive branch and/or Nigerian officials, public statements, and/or resolutions.
- Mandate executive branch attention to religious freedom in Nigeria via legislation, such as by requiring reporting to, or consultation with, Congress on such issues.
- Consider whether or not to provide funding for foreign assistance programs focused on averting, mitigating, and resolving interreligious conflicts.
- Consider whether or not to condition or restrict foreign aid for Nigeria due to religious freedom concerns.

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