

Nigeria's Federal Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief to all citizens, including the right to change religion or belief. The nation is also party to international agreements that guarantee freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and non-discrimination, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which it acceded in 1993.

However, violations of the right to FoRB have occurred for several decades in the north, arising mainly from the marginalisation of minority faith communities dating back to the colonial era. A longstanding impunity surrounding religion-related violence has created an enabling environment for the regular emergence of extremist religious sects and armed factions with an antipathy to FoRB. Nigeria is also one of 71 countries that criminalises blasphemy in a colonial era law that is incompatible with the country's national and international obligations.

Abductions by armed non-state actors

Nigerian citizens are experiencing terror attacks by a plethora of armed non-state actors for whom religion and/or ethnicity are either instrumentalised as rallying points, or are foundational to their existence. Some ultimately seek to enforce their extreme religious dogma on wider society.

Based in the northeast, the terrorist franchises Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue campaigns of abduction and murder, as does the al Qaeda affiliate Ansaru in the northwest. Since 2020, all of these terrorist factions in the north have made inroads into central Nigeria through alliances with irregular armed groups comprising members of Fulani ethnicity, including a militia operating in central Nigeria which in 2022 announced its presence in the south with an attack in Ondo State on St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church by assailants identified by survivors as Fulanis. It was the first terror attack on a church in the region, and its perpetrators are yet to be brought to justice.

More recently Lukarawa, a terrorist faction whose capabilities had been degraded by the military in 2020, regrouped in 2023 and has developed a presence in 10 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the northwestern states of Sokoto and Kebbi. The faction is reportedly affiliated to established terrorist groups operating in the Sahel, and its members communicate in Hausa, the Fulani language Fulfude, and Arabic.

A key element of the violence of all the armed insurgents is the abduction of women and girls, who are subsequently subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). 'A credible source within both Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram put the number of other nameless women and girls currently held captive by terrorists at between 300 to 400. These girls were abducted

from their communities, their farms, or while travelling on roads. They include both Christians and Muslims taken mainly across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, most of whom are young girls. [...] The abduction of girls and other women by terrorist factions in northern Nigeria has highlighted how women are objectified in the overall plans of these insurgents. [...] Some are killed, some are turned into slaves, and others are used as suicide bombers.'¹

Ongoing cases

Leah Sharibu

On 19 February 2018, 110 girls were abducted from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, by terrorists belonging to ISWAP. Credible sources allege the security forces failed to act on warnings of an impending attack. On 21 March 2018, following negotiations with the government, ISWAP returned 104 of the girls, warning townsfolk never to enrol their children in school again, or they would be seized permanently. Five had died enroute to the terrorists' hideout. However, Leah Sharibu, aged 14 at the time and the sole Christian among them, remains in captivity, declared a 'slave for life' for her refusal to convert as a pre-condition for release.

Ms Sharibu's abduction occurred during the tenure of President Muhammadu Buhari. While in opposition he strongly condemned the Jonathan administration following the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls (see below); however, his administration oversaw the negotiations that released Ms Sharibu's colleagues while leaving her behind. Despite promising Rebecca Sharibu, Leah's mother, that he would do everything possible to bring her daughter back, and sending ministerial delegations (along with media) to meet with her on two occasions, he completed two presidential terms without fulfilling his promise.

In the meantime Ms Sharibu's life has taken an even sadder trajectory. She has been renamed 'Hafsatu', was forcibly 'married' and is currently held by an ISWAP fighter, with three children from three different ISWAP fighters.²

The Chibok Girls

14 April 2024 marked the 10th anniversary of the abductions by Boko Haram of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, a town in southern Borno State, where the population is around 35% Christian, and which continues to experience terrorist attacks to this day. 217 of the abductees were members of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Several have been released, allegedly for significant payments during prisoner exchanges, while others have escaped, initially in the wake of the government's announcement of an amnesty for repentant fighters in 2015, and particularly following the defeat of Boko Haram by ISWAP in 2021. However, 82 Chibok Girls are still missing.

¹ CSW Nigeria, 'Leah and the Other Missing Girls', 2024

² Ibid.,

Several Chibok Girls who returned with children and Boko Haram fighters purporting to be their husbands were housed with these men in government deradicalisation centres, a development that has been likened to criminals benefiting from their crimes.³ Although the Borno State government asserted the returnees were not coerced into staying with these men, none appear to have received the psychosocial interventions necessary to assist them in processing their ordeal and coming to an informed decision.

Abductions by Fulani militia

In the latest Pew Center Report on government restrictions on religion, Nigeria was among 24 countries with high or very high scores on both the Government Restriction Index (GRI) and the Societal Hostilities Index (SHI).⁴ While the GRI ranking was High, the SHI ranking was Very High, which the report attributed to the occurrence and reports of 'sectarian tensions and violence ... in multiple years' during the reporting period (2018 through 2022).

Violence by militia comprising members of Fulani ethnicity has been underway in predominantly Christian Plateau State since March 2010. Attacks on non-Muslim communities elsewhere in central Nigeria, also known as the Middlebelt, have been ongoing since 2011, but surged exponentially in 2015, as the increasingly well-armed militia targeted farming communities in Bauchi, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba States and the southern part of Kaduna State.

The militia overruns farming communities, looting, burning, destroying property, forcibly displacing indigenous populations and occupying their ancestral lands. Tens of thousands have been killed, with some members of the international community raising concerns that the current violations may constitute emerging atrocity crimes. In a region where ethnicity generally correlates with religion, these attacks have often been described as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing.

Case study: Ongoing violence in southern Kaduna State

Communities in parts of the predominantly Christian area of southern Kaduna continue to experience attacks and kidnappings for ransom. As the assailants demand increasingly large sums from friends and families of abductees in rural communities, hundreds of villagers remain in captivity, subjected to brutal assaults, SGBV, and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment until ransoms are paid in full. Individuals who transport ransom payments

to kidnapping dens are often abducted themselves, and many abductees are killed after payments are made.⁵

Kajuru LGA has been under sustained attack since 2018, when the paramount ruler of the Adara people was abducted and murdered by Fulani assailants who are yet to face prosecution, and the predominantly Christian chiefdom was subsequently balkanised and placed under two emirates by the former governor of Kaduna, Nasir el Rufai, despite the fact that under 15% of the population are Hausa or Fulani.

In an indication of the severity of the situation in the LGA, an official in Nigeria's Directorate of State Security (DSS) stated in May 2024 that there were 'several Adara villages that have been captured [...] They have given the indigenous people options to leave their villages or stay under their terms and conditions.' The villagers remaining in these villages are obliged to pay taxes to the militia before planting and harvesting in an area covering thousands of hectares, and can also face arbitrary demands, including for foodstuffs and the impromptu preparation of meals. 'But the most humiliating aspect is that they can come into your home and rape your wife and daughters, and even sleep overnight.'⁶

More recently, a series of violent episodes that began in late 2024 has forced over 5,000 residents⁷ to flee ancestral lands in parts of Kajuru LGA, including the Angwar Rogo and Angwar Sarki, Libere and Maraban Kajuru areas, leaving many communities desolate.

On 30 November 2024 militia men attacked the Gefe community, killing two people and injuring five others. The following day, on 1 December, three people were abducted from Ungwan Tsabta, Maraban Kajuru.

5 December 2024 saw an attack on Libere, also in Kajuru, in which homes, motorcycles, and valuables were set alight. Then on 8 December 2024 three people were abducted from Maraban Kajuru, five were seized from Kikwari, two women were kidnapped from Kutura, and five others were kidnapped and one person killed in Angwaku.

Six people were abducted from Rafinkunu on 11 December 2024, one was abducted from Ungwan Dorowa Maro on 14 December, and on 16 December 2024 armed assailants targeted Kuvoh in Kauru LGA, killing one person, abducting three people, and injuring several others.

One of the most recent attacks occurred on New Years Day 2025, when assailants riding motorcycles and reportedly dressed in Nigerian Army uniforms invaded the Ungwar Rogo community in the Maro Ward of Kajuru LGA, stealing

3 CSW Nigeria, 'A Criminal Shouldn't Benefit from His/her Criminal Activities', 9 April 2024 <https://cswng.org.ng/a-criminal-shouldnt-benefit-from-hisher-criminal-activities>

4 Pew Research Center, 'Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022', December 2024 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/government-restrictions-on-religion-stayed-at-peak-levels-globally-in-2022/#countries-with-high-gri-scores-and-low-or-moderate-shi-scores>

5 CSW, 'Southern Kaduna state: a neglected crisis', 14 November 2022 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2022/11/14/report/5853/article.htm>

6 Truth Nigeria, 'Captured Kaduna Villages Turned into Rape Dens for Terrorists: Police Official', 31 May 2024 <https://truthnigeria.com/2024/05/captured-kaduna-villages-turned-into-rape-dens-for-terrorists-police-official/>

7 SilverBird News 24, 'Banditry in Kaduna: Residents of Deserted Kajuru Community Seek Government Intervention', 9 January 2025 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n5bbtSVC-8>

and vandalising farm produce. The militia men also burned down 15 homes and set fire to the local Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) building after looting the church and the vicarage of all removable goods.⁸

Kachia LGA, which borders Kajuru, has also witnessed a rise in militia violence and abductions for ransom. One man was killed, and eight people were injured in an attack on Awon village on 19 November 2024. Four of the injured had to have bullets removed from their bodies after they were taken to a hospital in Kaduna city, including a six-year-old boy named Destiny David who had a bullet lodged in his spinal cord, and his father, who also suffered bullet wounds. In addition, seven people were abducted: five women - including Destiny's mother who also suffered a gunshot wound - Destiny's three-year old brother, and a ten-year-old boy. Militia men returned to attack the village for a second time, but were driven away by local youth.

Six of the people abducted from Awon remain in captivity pending payment of ransoms. In an act of the gratuitous cruelty that is the hallmark of such abductions, during the week beginning 6 January their captors pretended to release one of the women, escorting her to the edge of the village before shooting her dead and leaving her corpse there.⁹

'The remoteness and vastness of the terrain means only a few these incidents come to public attention. The epicentre of this violence is in Kajuru Kachia and Chukun LGAs, and increasingly, in Kaura LGA. These terrorists attack when they want to, kill if they want to, and abduct if they want to. Some of these villagers do nothing without their permission. In some areas they are even forced to hand over young girls, who are taken to the kidnappers' camps, subjected to SGBV, and returned when the kidnappers tire of them. There are hundreds of people currently held in kidnappers' dens. Sadly, given the hand to mouth existences of villagers in remote areas, there is little likelihood of ransoms being paid, and they are likely to eventually be killed.'¹⁰

Abductions in Shari'a states

In Shari'a states and particularly in rural areas, girls from minority faith communities, many of them underage, can face abduction, forced conversion and marriage without parental consent. Such abductions predate those committed by terrorist factions, and have been shrouded in impunity for decades. Parents seeking the release of their daughters are generally informed they converted and married willingly, or are in the custody of Muslim traditional rulers or Shari'a Commissions and have no desire to return. Appeals to law enforcement agencies generally prove fruitless, despite strong domestic laws penalising abduction, trafficking and child defilement.

In some instances girls are not taken forcibly, but are groomed. Once they are in their hands, their captors make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to return. 'Once a girl is abducted, her abductors quickly initiate sex, usually in the form of rape, in a sinister belief that it confers a form of legitimacy to their claim of ownership of their victim, and will dissuade parents from vigorously pursuing the return of their daughter, due to residual social stigma.'¹¹

As with abductions, by terrorist factions, the use of euphemisms such as 'marriage' should not obscure the reality, which is that female minors whose rights to FoRB, education, parental care, and liberty and security of person, among others, are being violated egregiously, are subjected to gender specific abuses repeatedly and with little or no recourse to justice, simply on account of their religious beliefs.

Nigeria has significant legislation prohibiting abduction, child defilement and child marriage. Both the Criminal Code, which is applicable in southern states, and the Penal Code, applicable in northern states, criminalise abduction, rape, and forced marriage. In addition, the Child Rights Act (2003) prohibits child marriage in Section 21, which declares that 'a marriage so contracted is null and void and of no effect whatsoever.' Section 23 stipulates a fine of N500,000, 'or imprisonment for a term of five years, or to both such fine and imprisonment' for anyone who marries a child, is betrothed to a child, promotes the marriage of a child, or betroths a child.¹²

The Act also specifies a 10-year sentence for abducting a child from lawful custody if the abductee remains in Nigeria, and a maximum life term for sexual relations (defilement) with children.

'Despite the strong legal framework provided by the Child Rights Act, its implementation faces significant challenges in northern Nigeria. These challenges include a lack of awareness of where to go for assistance, religious and cultural resistance, and the continuing need for concerted efforts by law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, and civil society organizations to ensure proper enforcement. Consequently, these legal provisions are rarely enforced, engendering impunity as abducted children remain in the hands of their captors despite their parent's best efforts to retrieve them.'¹²

Recommendations

- Urge the Nigerian government to prioritise the release and safe return of Leah Sharibu, the remaining Chibok Girls, and all others held captive by violent non-state actors, including those held in kidnappers' dens across the country. Encourage them also to prioritise the

8 *Truth Nigeria*, '35 Days of Murder Near Kaduna City Still Unreported by Media', 8 January 2025 <https://truthnigeria.com/2025/01/35-days-of-murder-near-kaduna-city-still-unreported-by-media/>

9 Email Briefing from CSW Nigeria, 13 January 2025

10 Ibid.,

11 *CSW Nigeria*, 'Abduction, Conversion, and Forceful Marriage of Christian Girls and Young Women in Northern Nigeria', 2024 Report

12 Ibid.,

reintegration and return to education of escaped Chibok Girls, ensuring they receive psychosocial assistance.

- Call on the government of Nigeria to fully resource and mandate the security services to tackle comprehensively the plethora of violent non-state actors operating within its borders, offering all necessary assistance in this regard.
- Encourage the government of Nigeria to formulate a comprehensive strategy to address every source of violence in a swift, decisive and unbiased manner, providing immediate and effective protection for communities targeted by terrorist violence as a matter of urgency, and in accordance with the constitutional obligation stipulated in Section 14 (2) (b) of Nigeria's 1999 constitution (as amended).¹³
- Stressing the necessity of eroding impunity and strengthening the rule of law through accountability, call for the killers of Adara Paramount Ruler HRH Maiwada Raphael Galadima to be brought to justice, and for perpetrators of militia-related violence to be apprehended and prosecuted.
- While commending recent efforts by the current Kaduna State administration to formulate a local peace and reconciliation model, it is vital for the authorities to ensure that programmes for the disarming and reintegration of repentant perpetrators are always coupled with restorative justice, compensation and other forms of restitution for victims and survivors. Care must also be taken to ensure localised peace and reconciliation efforts include all parties to the conflict.¹⁴
- Urge the federal authorities to put pressure on state governments and security operatives to enforce laws penalising child abduction in accordance with Nigeria's Child Rights Act and the nation's obligations under regional and international law, and to facilitate the swift return of abductees to their families. To this end, Nigeria must ensure that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is fully resourced and equipped to fully investigate and secure the releases of all abductees.

Blasphemy issues

Nigeria's blasphemy law stipulates a two-year sentence. Additionally, the enactment of Shari'a penal codes by 12 states from 2001 onwards effectively created a de facto state religion in violation of the secular constitution, allowing Shari'a courts to arrogate jurisdiction reserved for criminal courts over capital sentences, and to issue punishments that contravene Nigeria's obligations under the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (CAT).

There is also a strong correlation between blasphemy, religious extremism, and mob violence, with perpetrators of blasphemy-related violations enjoying impunity.

Deborah Emmanuel

On 12 May 2022 a Christian student named Deborah Emmanuel was lynched at her school in Sokoto State following a blasphemy accusation. As tensions had begun to rise, she had been taken to the campus' security office in order to ensure her safety, but it was eventually overrun by a mob numbering over 100. Ms Emmanuel was beaten and stoned to death, then her body was burnt beyond recognition. Security reinforcements, who reportedly arrived at the scene and were present during the murder, did nothing to assist her.

Despite the existence of many videos depicting Ms Emmanuel's killers, only two male students were arrested, and were merely charged with 'public disturbance', a bailable offence. They received free representation from 34 Muslim lawyers led by a law professor, and were released in January 2023 on the grounds that the prosecution had regularly failed to attend court hearings, and that even when they were present, they were 'not serious in prosecuting the case.'

Muslim blasphemy victims

On 4 June 2022 Ahmad Usman, a 30-year-old Muslim vigilante, was immolated at a fruit market in Abuja for alleged blasphemy.

On or around 14 June 2022 three northerners named Abubakar Musa, Sarauta Monsur and Surajo Yusuf stabbed, beat, and immolated sex worker Hannah Saliu in Lagos, after finding a Quran under her pillow.

On 20 June 2023 market trader and successful butcher Usman Buda was lynched in Sokoto State following an unproven allegation that he blasphemed during an argument with a fellow market trader. His friends insisted Mr Buda, who was a devout member of the Salafi Izala movement, would never have blasphemed, and attributed his murder to jealousy on the part of competitors, highlighting that a butcher who lost business due to Mr Buda's popularity no longer faces any competition.

Excessive blasphemy sentences

Several men from minority Muslim communities have received excessive sentences, or have been detained for lengthy periods, following blasphemy accusations or convictions.

On 10 August 2020 a Shari'a court in Kano State sentenced Tijjaniyya Sufi singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, then aged 22, to death for allegedly blaspheming in a song he shared via WhatsApp. On 21 January 2021 the appellate division of

¹³ 'The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government.'

¹⁴ In several instances local peace and security efforts have involved talks between victim communities and local Fulani communities as opposed to the actual perpetrators of the violence.

the Kano State High Court overturned the sentence, citing procedural irregularities, and ordered a retrial. Mr Sharif-Aminu's lawyers asked the Kano Court of Appeal to rule on whether the High Court was wrong to order a retrial, arguing their client ought to have been discharged and acquitted. They also stated the High Court was wrong in not declaring Kano State's Sharia Penal Code inconsistent with Nigeria's secular constitution. However, on 17 August 2022, in a worrying split decision, the Court of Appeal upheld both the legality of the Shari'a Penal Code, and the decision of the lower court to quash the original sentence due to irregularities and order a retrial.

Mr Sharif-Aminu remains in prison and is petitioning Nigeria's Supreme Court. In what could prove to be a landmark challenge to the blasphemy law, and the legality and constitutionality of the Shari'a Penal Code, Mr Sharif-Aminu is also seeking 'an order declaring S.382(b) of the Sharia Penal Code Law of Kano State 2000 being in conflict and incompatible with S.34(1) 7 (a), S.38(1), S.39(1), and other provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Articles 5, 8, and 9, among others, of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and Articles 7, 18, and 19, among others, of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, as well as an order declaring other sections of the Sharia Penal Code [...] as being similarly incompatible with the Constitution and international treaties.'¹⁵

Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara, a Qadiriyya scholar based in Kano State, was arrested on 17 July 2021. On 15 December 2022 the Sheikh was sentenced to death by hanging, and he is currently appealing this sentence.

Isma'ila Sani Isah remains detained, having been arrested in 2021 by the Sokoto State Police Command for allegedly posting a blasphemous comment about the Islamic prophet Muhammad on Facebook.

In an earlier high-profile case involving Tijjaniyya adherents, on 25 June 2015 the Upper Shari'a Court in Kano State sentenced cleric Abdul Nyass and eight of his followers to death for blasphemy after he was accused of stating that Sheikh Ibrahim Nyass, a Senegalese Tijjaniyya cleric, was greater than the Prophet Mohammed. In the aftermath of the allegation, thousands of youth burned down the court in the Rijiyar Lemo neighbourhood where the cleric and his

followers were due to appear, while others burned down his house in Kano. Mr Nyass remains in detention.

Recommendations

- Urge the government of Nigeria to address the current impunity surrounding blasphemy-related violence by penalising purveyors of false allegations and bringing inciters and perpetrators of violence to justice, thereby strengthening the rule of law. In particular, ensure the inciters and killers of Deborah Emmanuel, Ahmad Usman, Hannah Saliu and Usman Buda are brought to justice, holding trials in less volatile locations if necessary.
- Call on the government of Nigeria to ensure that the Supreme Court is free to make a ruling in the case of Yahaya Sherif-Aminu in accordance with the law and without external pressures.
- Encourage Nigeria to repeal the blasphemy law, review and overturn excessive blasphemy-related sentences, and to bring the laws and practices of individual states into conformity with the constitution and Nigeria's obligations under international law.

15 Including Sections: 94 (1) (b); 97 (a-j); 99; 115 (1) (2); 116(2): 117; 118 (2): 123; 125 (e-b), 126 (e) (2): 127 (a-b); 129 (a b): 131; 134: 134(b): 135(2): 136; 137: 140 (b); 141 (b): 146 (a): 148; 163 (c): 169: 150; 154; 155; 157; 162; 163 (c); 169: 170; 174 (3); 175-178; 186; 187; 189; 191-194; 196; 197; 199; 200; 208-211; 216- 221; 223-227; 237; 246 (a); 260 (a-b); 264; 268; 273; 276 (c), (i); 277 (c); 280 (b): 281-284 (c); 285-287 (b); 290; 291 (b); 292; 293 (d) (-i): 294 (a-b): 295 (a): 296 (a); a-b): 295 (a): 296 (a); 297 (a-b); 298 (b); 299 (a-b) 300-308; 309 (a-b); 310-312; 315 (1-2): 316 (1): 317; 323; 324 (a); 325; 328; 329 (a-b); 330-332; 335 (b); 336 (b); 337 (b); 338 (b): 339 (b); 340; 342 (c); 344 (c); 345 (c): 346 (c): 347 (b): 348 (b); 349 (b); 352 (a): 353; 356; 358; 360-362; 368; 369 (b); 373; 376; 377(e); 385; 387 (b); 388 (1)

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