

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	694
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Nigeria: Situation of Christians, including those living in northern cities, in Lagos, and in Abuja; state protection (2021-November 2023)
Udgivet:	10. november 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. december 2023

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NGA201703.E

Nigeria: Situation of Christians, including those living in northern cities, in Lagos, and in Abuja; state protection (2021–November 2023)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Demographic Overview

Sources indicate that Christians represent 46.4 percent (Open Doors 2023) or "roughly" 50 percent (ACLED 2022-07-21) of Nigeria's population (ACLED 2022-07-21; Open Doors 2023). According to the most recent Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [1], conducted from August to December 2018 by the National Population Commission (NPC) of Nigeria with technical assistance from ICF [2], 53.5 percent of the Nigerian population is Muslim, while 10.4 percent is Catholic and 35.6 percent is "[o]ther Christian" [3] (NPC of Nigeria & ICF 2019-10, 51). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the country's population is "roughly split" between the south, which is "majority" Christian and the north, which is "majority" Muslim (2022-05-16). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2022* reports that, in the North West and North East zones, there are "significant Christian populations" despite Islam being the "dominant religion"; in North Central, Christians and Muslims are approximately equal in numbers (US 2023-05-15, 6). The same source notes that Christianity is the "dominant" religion in Lagos and Nigeria's southern geopolitical zones more generally (US 2023-05-15, 6).

A 2020 country report on Nigeria by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that "[a]pproximately" three quarters of Nigerian Christians are Protestant, with the "largest populations" belonging to the Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.13). The same source reports that "[a]round a quarter" of the country's Christians are Roman Catholic (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.13). The DFAT report adds that Evangelical Christian denominations are "growing rapidly" in certain zones, including North Central (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.13).

2. Legislation

The Constitution of Nigeria provides the following on freedom of religion:

10. Prohibition of State Religion

The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.

...

15. Political objectives

1. The motto of the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress.
2. Accordingly, national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.

...

38. Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

1. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
3. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination. (Nigeria 1999, bold in original)

HRW notes that while Nigeria's constitution "guarantees the right to freedom of expression, thought, and conscience, the country's criminal law makes it an offense to insult religion" (2022-05-16). The *Criminal Code Act* of Nigeria provides the following on "[i]nsult to a religion":

Any person who does an act which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanour and is liable to imprisonment for two years. (Nigeria 1990)

A 2019 US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report indicates that since 1999, Sharia [Shari'ah, Shari'a] penal and criminal procedure codes have been adopted in 12 of the northern states: Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara (US 2019-12, 7, 8). The same source states the following:

Although non-Muslims are not subject to Shari'ah Penal Codes, they are subject to some of the statutory agencies such as the Kano State Censorship Board and hisbah [4]—particularly in terms of enforcing the state-wide ban on the sale of alcohol. (US 2019-12, 3)

The DFAT report states that, according to "[i]nternational observers," "some" state and local authorities have "'endorsed' de facto official religions in their territories" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.19). DFAT further notes that both Christian and Muslim groups have reported "discriminat[ion]" by "some" state and local laws, such as by "limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly" and their access to "government employment" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.19).

A report by Open Doors, a Christian advocacy organization that supports "persecuted Christians" in more than 70 countries (Open Doors n.d.), states that Christian children, "especially" in the north, are being

"forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts" (2022-01, 8). The DFAT report notes that, according to "Christian activists,"

children from religious minority communities face discrimination in several *sharia* states, including being denied access to specific educational courses, the non-release of final results, being compelled to study a religion different from their own and being denied school/university admission or scholarships. (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.19, italics in original)

The DFAT report adds that "most cases" of such discrimination are likely to be the result of state and local governments operating policies of "positive discrimination" in favour of the "indigene" and/or majority population rather than active discrimination on religious-based grounds. (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.19)

3. Situation of Christians in the North

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2022* states that according to civil society and the media, "general insecurity" is "prevalent throughout" Nigeria, "particularly" in the North West zone (US 2023-05-15, 1). The same source adds that violent incidents affecting both Muslims and Christians occurred "frequent[ly]," "particularly" in the north, "resulting in numerous deaths" (US 2023-05-15, 1). The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a "disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project" on political violence and protests around the world, indicates that a "series of attacks" against churches and Christian leaders in Nigeria led to "concerns about escalating violence" targeting the Christian community (2022-07-21).

A report by the Kukah Centre (TKC), a Nigeria-based policy research institute founded by the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto (TKC n.d.), states that "[g]enerally, practicing Christianity in Northern Nigeria is difficult considering the historical, socio-cultural, and

political circumstances in the region" and that the area is characterized by the "persecution of Christians" and the imposition of certain aspects of Islamic law (2023-04-28, 4). Open Doors, in a country profile of Nigeria, notes that Christians in the northern Nigeria are "habitually treated as second-class citizens and suffer discrimination and hostility," and those from a Muslim background additionally experience "rejection from their own families, pressure to give up Christianity, and often physical violence" (Open Doors 2023). The TKC report cites a Hausa Christian in Kano State as stating in an interview that Hausa Christians cannot obtain government employment "through mere interviews"; it requires having contacts (2023-04-28, 12).

TKC's report states that "religiously motivated attacks" against Christians in northern Nigeria are attributed to other "pretext factors," such as "the proliferation of arms, porous borders, poverty, relative deprivation, and farmers' and herders' conflicts" (2023-04-28, 3). According to ACLED, "[c]ompetition between and within armed groups often" leads to violence against "vulnerable populations, including Christian minority communities" in the north (2022-07-21).

TKC indicates that northern Nigeria is divided into three geopolitical zones: North West, North East, and North Central (2023-04-28, 24). Sources note that each zone is (TKC 2023-04-28, 7) or has been (Open Doors 2022-01, 37) characterized by a particular perpetrator of violence: Fulani herdsmen in the North Central region, Islamic terrorist groups in the North East, and bandits [5] in the North West (TKC 2023-04-28, 7; Open Doors 2022-01, 37). TKC reports that, between 1 October 2022 and 31 January 2023, there were 29 attacks across 6 states in the North Central zone, 7 attacks across 2 states in the North West, and 3 attacks across 2 states in the North East (2023-04-28, 24).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2022* reports that, for "more than a decade," the Nigerian military has been at "war" with the "terrorist groups" Boko Haram and Islamic State – West Africa

Province (ISWAP) [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – West Africa (ISIS-WA), *Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah*], which have "killed or kidnapped" Muslims and Christians; "according to observers," both groups continued to attack "religious targets, including churches and mosques" in 2022 (US 2023-05-15, 19). The DFAT report notes that Christians are "opportunistically" targeted by Boko Haram and that "[d]espite claiming an Islamist motivation, Boko Haram has regularly committed attacks against both Christian and Muslim religious communities and institutions" in northeastern Nigeria (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 2.60, 3.20).

Open Doors reports that Christians face violence from Boko Haram and ISWAP, which is a Boko Haram splinter group, as well as from Fulani militia and "so-called armed 'bandits'" (2022-01, 13). The same source notes that in December 2019 an ISWAP-affiliated faction published a video of the execution of 10 Christians and 1 Muslim "to avenge the death" of a Daesh [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)] leader (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.20).

ACLED states that as of June 2022, the average number of "violent events targeting Christians" each month in the North West and North Central regions increased by 50 percent "compared to 2020," noting that the increase is "proportional" to the rise in organized political violence generally (2022-07-21). The same source notes that "since 2020" violence against Christians comprises on average "around" three percent of "organized political violence events" per month in North West and North Central (ACLED 2022-07-21).

TKC reports as of April 2023 that "[s]ince the beginning of 2022, not less than 18 Catholic priests were abducted by armed Fulani bandits across" Nigeria, with 80 percent of these abductions occurring in the North West (2023-04-28, 22). ACLED reports that the attacks targeting Christians have been "geographically concentrated" in Kaduna State [in the North West zone], as has the "bulk of overall militia activity" (2022-

07-21). World Council of Churches (WCC), a fellowship of 352 churches from more than 120 countries (WCC n.d.), reports that in Kaduna State, Christians are experiencing bandit attacks on their homes, villages and churches, with some Christians being killed and others kidnapped for ransom; "[o]ver" 300 people, "mainly" Christians, were killed in that state between January and July 2020 (WCC 2021-08-18). Sources report that the Christian areas of Kaduna State are "experiencing the highest level of bandit attacks" (WCC 2021-08-18) or that communities in the "predominantly" Christian area of southern Kaduna State "experience kidnappings for ransom and attacks on their communities on an almost daily basis" (CSW 2022-11-14). TKC indicates that in the North West, Christians are being "forceful[ly]" converted to Islam (2023-04-28, 8). CSW, a UK-based Christian organization that advocates for religious freedom worldwide and has an office in Kaduna (CSW n.d.), notes in a November 2022 briefing that attacks on non-Muslim farming communities, including in Kaduna, have been "ongoing" since 2011 but "increased exponentially" when the "current administration" came to power in 2015 (2022-11-14). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In a briefing on southern Kaduna State, CSW states the following:

In a region where ethnicity generally correlates with religion, ethnic minorities are invariably also religious ones. Consequently, the attacks assume an ethno-religious coloration and increasingly constitute forcible displacement, as the ancestral lands of indigenous communities are frequently occupied after communities flee to safer environments. (CSW 2022-11-14)

ACLED reports that "in recent years" Borno State has had the second highest incidence of violence "targeting Christians," after Kaduna State (2022-07-21). However, the same source adds that political

violence has "declined" in Borno since 2020, and violence targeting Christians made up "less than" two percent of the state's total "organized political violence" in 2020 and 2021 (ACLED 2022-07-21).

According to CSW, since March 2010 there has been violence in Plateau State [located in the North Central zone], "perpetrated by an irregular armed faction" made up of Fulani men (2022-11-14). Similarly, the DFAT report notes that in the Middle Belt [6], "ongoing conflict" between herdsman, who are "predominantly" Muslim Fulani, and Muslim and Christian farmers has resulted in "numerous deaths, injuries and displacements" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.21). The same source cites "[m]ultiple Christian NGOs" as stating that "religious identity is a primary driver of the conflict" and that Christian "communities, religious leaders and churches" have "predominantly" been targeted (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.21). However, DFAT also cites "[a]uthorities" as indicating that the attacks were "not religiously motivated" and notes that Muslim religious figures have also been targets and Muslims have been "killed or displaced, albeit in lower numbers than Christians" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.21). TKC indicates that a "spate of attacks" has occurred in North Central region with the goal of displacing Christians and taking over their "fertile" agricultural land (2023-04-28, 7).

Open Doors reports that Christians have been "accused [of] and charged with blasphemy" particularly in the northern states (2022-01, 8). According to HRW, "Sharia, or Islamic law," enforced in 12 northern states, "criminalizes blasphemy" (2022-05-16). Sources report that in May 2022, a [Christian (Freedom House 2023-03-09, Sec. D2)] university student in Sokoto was murdered by a group of [Muslim (Freedom House 2023-03-09, Sec. D2)] students who accused her of blasphemy (Freedom House 2023-03-09, Sec. D2; HRW 2022-05-16; AP 2022-05-12). The Associated Press (AP) reports that the victim was receiving protection from the security personnel of her university, but they were "overpowered" by the "angry youths" who attacked her (AP 2022-05-12).

Sources report that ["at least" (Freedom House 2023-03-09, Sec. D2)] two individuals were arrested in connection with this murder (AP 2022-05-12; Freedom House 2023-03-09, Sec. D2). According to HRW, blasphemy accusations "often trigger mob violence" prior to authorities "even" becoming involved (2022-05-16). The DFAT report indicates that, in Kano State, "perceived offences against religion have often resulted in 'mob justice', which generally occurs with impunity" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 3.26).

4. Situation of Christians in Abuja and Lagos

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of ACLED stated that their organization "has no recorded cases of political violence targeting Christians" in either Abuja or Lagos. The same source added that

[w]hile civilians who have been victims of violence from political armed groups may be Christian, the targeting of civilians in Abuja and Lagos has been based on other affiliations or identities, such as ethnicity, gender, or political identity. (ACLED 2023-10-05)

4.1 Situation of Christians in Abuja

ACLED indicates that "Islamist militants are expanding operations and shifting closer" to the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) (2022-07-21). TKC reports that between 1 November 2022 and 31 January 2023, 2 deaths occurred in Abuja as a result of "criminal activities of Fulani herdsmen and bandits," of a total of 182 such deaths in the North Central region (2023-04-28, 24-26).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher at TKC, speaking on their own behalf, noted that the FCT, including Abuja, is a "relatively secure and welcoming" place for Christian communities to live and work (Researcher 2023-10-06). The same source stated that

Abuja provides "better security compared to other states in the country, which enables Christians to engage in religious activities and carry out their daily activities without apprehension" (Researcher 2023-10-06).

The ACLED representative noted that, since 2021, ACLED has recorded only two cases of "violence targeting Christians" in the FCT, making up "less than" two percent of "total civilian targeting events" annually in that region (ACLED 2023-10-05). The same source provided the following information regarding the two instances of anti-Christian violence:

- In March 2022, three people—an Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) pastor and two sons of a former municipal official—were abducted from Godozhi community (Kuje, FCT) by "armed individuals." They were released three days later after an "undisclosed amount" of ransom money, food, drugs and drinks were paid.
- In March 2023, nine people, including a pastor, his wife and children, were abducted by an "unidentified armed group" in Kuchibiyi in the Kubwa area (Abuja Municipality, FCT); some abductees were released while others were held for a ransom of 50 million naira (NGN) [C\$87,443] (ACLED 2023-10-05).

4.2 Situation of Christians in Lagos

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2022* notes that Christianity is the "dominant" religion in the Southwest, including in Lagos (US 2023-05-15, 6).

The ACLED representative noted that since 2021 their organization has recorded no cases of "political violence targeting Christians" in the city of Lagos (ACLED 2023-10-05). However, the same source described the following 5 instances of such violence [in Local Government Areas (LGAs) within Metropolitan Lagos] over the same time period (ACLED 2023-10-05):

- In early August 2021 in Ketu, Kosofe LGA, a Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) pastor was shot and

- killed at the pulpit by an "unidentified cult militia";
- On 26 September 2021 in Festac, Amuwo-Odofin LGA, a man was abducted from his church by "unidentified armed men." No ransom demands have been reported;
- On 27 September 2021 in Dopemu, Agege LGA, a pastor and his wife were abducted by "an unidentified armed group." The group initially demanded 100 million NGN in ransom for the couple, but ultimately released the wife and reduced the ransom to 50 million NGN;
- On 25 January 2022 in Jakande, Eti-Osa LGA, a pastor was attacked and beaten by an "armed group," as was a congregation member who attempted to intervene. "[R]eports indicate" that the attack is tied to a leadership struggle within the church;
- On 26 January 2022 in Ikoyi, Eti-Osa LGA, a pastor was "physically assaulted by a mob," which also invaded the church with a bulldozer and took down the fence and trees (ACLED 2023-10-05).

5. State Protection

According to TKC, "many" Christian communities in the north are becoming targets for "violent attacks" because of the "government's failure" to address the situation (2023-04-28, 3). The report by Open Doors states that the government is "regularly violating or failing to protect" the rights of Christians (2022-01, 8). The same source indicates that the northern "ruling elite have been giving preferential treatment to Muslims and discriminating against Christians" (Open Doors 2022-01, 15). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

TKC notes that banditry and kidnapping is "prevalent" in the North West due to the "lack of government control and the absence of security in some rural Christian minority communities" (2023-04-28, 6). According to the DFAT report, "[c]apacity constraints" have limited the Nigerian Police Force's ability to act, "particularly" in conflicts such as the Middle Belt clashes between "mostly Fulani herders" and Muslim and Christian

farmers; the government has been "routinely" relying on the military to police communities experiencing "high levels of violence" (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 5.2).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2022* notes that in 2022 "[s]enior Christian and Muslim religious leaders made statements" critical of "governmen[t] inaction in the face of continued widespread violence" (US 2023-05-15). According to World Watch Monitor, an organization that reports on the "persecution" of Christians worldwide for their faith (World Watch Monitor n.d.), "neither Christians nor other minority groups can count on" the Nigerian government's "security apparatus" for protection (World Watch Monitor 2022-01-19).

According to a report from the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, an "informal" group of members from the House of Commons and the House of Lords, [t]he inability of the Nigerian [f]ederal and [s]tate [g]overnments to protect Christian farmers, and the lack of political will to respond adequately to warnings or to bring perpetrators of violence to justice, has fostered feelings of victimisation and persecution. (APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief 2020-06-20, 9)

The TKC researcher stated that the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), an "independent" government institution tasked with promoting, protecting, and enforcing human rights in Nigeria (Nigeria n.d.a), is headquartered in Abuja and open to all citizens (Christians and Muslims alike) to file complaints about violations of their human rights (Researcher 2023-10-06). According to the NHRC, a "complaint treatment mechanism" has been established to handle complaints of human rights violations received at the headquarters and all the State's offices; such complaints can be made in writing, by email or orally (Nigeria n.d.b). The NHRC website notes that per *The NHRC (Amendment) Act, 2010*, decisions made by the NHRC's Governing Council "are registrable as decisions of the High Court" (Nigeria n.d.b).

The NHRC's 2022 annual report indicates that there were 2,080 complaints regarding "Freedom of Religion," making it the category with the second lowest number of complaints filed with the NHRC in 2022 (Nigeria 2023-05-25, 44). The researcher noted that awareness of such state protection mechanisms is "generally low" among the public (2023-10-06). Information on the effectiveness of the NHRC could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] According to the Demographic and Health Survey for Nigeria, a "representative sample" of "approximately" 42,000 "randomly selected" households were surveyed and within those households, "target groups" were women aged 15 to 49 and men aged 15 to 59 (NPC of Nigeria & ICF 2019-10, xix).

[2] ICF is the organization responsible for the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) Program (ICF n.d.). The DHS Program is a project funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) that "provid[es] support and technical assistance in the implementation of population and health surveys in countries worldwide" (NPC of Nigeria & ICF 2019-10, ii).

[3] According to *Vanguard*, a Nigerian newspaper, citing a statement issued by the NPC, the 2023 census questionnaire will not include questions about ethnicity and religion due to their "volatile nature" in

national discourse (2022-07-17). The same source notes, again citing the NPC, that the 1991 and 2006 censuses also excluded questions on religion and ethnicity (*Vanguard* 2022-07-17).

[4] The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that in northern Nigeria, hisbah groups "consist of mostly locally recruited young men who patrol neighborhoods to observe any violations of Shari'ah law" (US 2019-12, 14). The same source states that "[s]ome observers have compared hisbah groups to vigilante groups, particularly in states that do not have an official hisbah association but where unofficial hisbah groups patrol" (US 2019-12, 16).

[5] ACLED defines "'banditry'" as the activities of militias in Nigeria and reports that this violence accounted for a third of all political violence events in 2021 (ACLED 2022-07-21).

[6] The DFAT report indicates that the Middle Belt includes the states of Plateau, Adamawa, Nasarawa and Taraba (Australia 2020-12-03, para. 2.68). Open Doors notes that the Middle Belt overlaps "loosely" with the North Central zone (Open Doors 2022-01, 37).

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Date modified:

2023-10-03