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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Nigeria

Executive Summary

The constitution bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propagate, or change their religion. The federal government did not always prevent or quell violence, at times expressed along religious lines, in the northeastern and central regions of the country. The federal government often did not investigate prosecute, or punish those responsible for abusing religious freedom, and sometimes responded to violence with heavy-handed tactics. Human rights organizations reported that army troops killed hundreds of members of the Shia minority Muslim group Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) in Zaria, Kaduna State, in December, and buried them in mass graves, following an altercation at a roadblock that disrupted the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS). The military said IMN members attempted to assassinate the COAS, only seven IMN members died, and that it acted within its rules of engagement. Multiple institutions established inquiries into the incident. A state sharia court sentenced nine people to death for blasphemy, and the case remained on appeal. Election-related hate speech and violence were sometimes expressed along religious lines, despite extensive interfaith nonviolence messaging in the run-up to the elections. Members of regional minority religious groups said some state and local government laws discriminated against them. Non-Muslims stated sharia courts and sharia enforcement bodies in 12 northern states sometimes negatively affected their rights. Christian groups said that Christians faced difficulty obtaining government employment or permits to construct churches in those states.

The terrorist organization Boko Haram killed thousands of persons, in both indiscriminate acts of violence and attacks deliberately targeting Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their radical ideology, such as the Emir of Kano, as well as Christians. The military regained control over many urban areas of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States in the northeast that had been held by Boko Haram for months. In the course of attacks and in areas they controlled, Boko Haram committed mass killings, mass kidnappings, sexual assault, forced conversion, and forced conscription.

Both Muslims and Christians reported discrimination or abuse based on their religious affiliation in areas where they were in the minority and reported that they experienced societal pressure, including threats of violence and ostracism, if they changed or abandoned their faith. In May youths in Kano set fire to the home of a pastor, resulting in the death of the pastor's daughter, reportedly in response to his support of a young man who converted to Islam and then returned to Christianity. Religious groups continued to say some employers engaged in religious discrimination.

U.S. embassy and consulate general officials discussed and advocated for religious freedom and tolerance with government, religious, civil society, and traditional leaders. President Muhammadu Buhari met with President

Obama, Vice President Biden, and other top U.S. government officials in July, when they discussed topics including cooperation to combat Boko Haram. The Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and more than a dozen other visiting U.S. delegations and embassy and consulate general representatives raised religious freedom and other human rights-related issues with state and federal officials. The U.S. representatives offered to increase support for a holistic effort by the government to counter Boko Haram while protecting human rights and working to eliminate the factors that fuel violent extremism. They encouraged officials to address interreligious violence and called for timely legal action against perpetrators of violence. U.S. government-supported programs helped build interfaith networks to promote religious tolerance across the country, address the drivers of ethnic and religious violence in the central region, and protect vulnerable communities in the northeast.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 181.5 million (July 2015 estimate). While the Nigerian government has not tracked religion in any census since 1963, most observers estimate approximately 50 percent of the population is Muslim and 50 percent Christian. A small number adhere solely to indigenous religious beliefs, and many individuals combine indigenous beliefs and practices with Islamic or Christian beliefs and practices. Most Muslims are Sunni, divided among Sufi groups, including Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyyah. Growing Shia and Izala (Salafist) minorities exist. There is also a small number of Ahmadi Muslims. Christian groups include evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other groups include Jews, Bahais, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim northern states. Significant numbers of Christians also reside in the north, and Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in central Nigeria and in the southwestern states, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic group predominates. In the southeastern states, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists constitute the majority, although many Igbos combine traditional practices with Christianity. In the Niger Delta region, where the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups predominate, Christians form a substantial majority, and a very small minority of the population is Muslim. Evangelical denominations are growing rapidly in the central and southern regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution bars the federal government or state governments from establishing a state religion. It provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propagate, or change their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. The rights defined in the constitution cannot supersede the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health, or protecting the rights of others.

The constitution provides for state-level courts based on common or customary law systems, which have operated in the region for centuries. It specifically recognizes sharia courts for "civil proceedings" but is silent on the use of such courts for criminal cases. In addition to civil matters, often involving issues related to marriage, inheritance, and other family matters, sharia courts in 12 northern states also hear criminal cases where both the Muslim complainant and the Muslim defendant agree to the venue. The sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including *hadd* offenses (serious criminal offenses with punishments prescribed in the Quran) and prescribe punishments, such as caning, amputation, and death by stoning. Non-Muslims have the option to try their cases in the sharia courts if involved in civil disputes with Muslims. Common law courts hear the cases of Muslims and non-Muslims who do not choose to use sharia courts. Sharia courts do not have the authority to compel participation by non-Muslims, but in the past some non-Muslims took cases to sharia courts, citing their speed and low cost. Aggrieved parties can appeal sharia court judgments to three levels of sharia appellate courts. Decisions by the state sharia courts of appeal (the highest level of the sharia courts) theoretically can be appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal and then to the Supreme Court, although none have been.

A Zamfara State law requires all Muslims be subject to sharia courts for violations of the sharia penal code. Zamfara's state-level Hisbah Board regulates religious affairs and preaching, distributes licenses to imams, and attempts to resolve religious disputes in the state. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Katsina, and Yobe also

maintain state-level religious affairs ministries or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors have appointed special advisers on religious affairs.

Registration of religious groups is not required unless the groups want to undertake certain activities, such as building a house of worship, opening a bank account, or signing contracts. Christian and Muslim groups planning to build new churches or mosques must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission as an incorporated trustee, which involves submitting an application form, proof of public notice, a copy of the organization's constitution, a list of trustees, and a fee of 20,000 naira (\$100).

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction in public schools. The constitution states schools may not require students to receive religious instruction in any religion other than their own. State officials and many religious leaders have stated that students have the right to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs to provide an alternative to any instruction offered in a religion other than their own. The constitution also says no community will be prevented from providing religious instruction if all students are members of the same denomination.

Several states have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools. A Katsina State law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years of incarceration and/or a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$2,514) for operating without a license.

Government Practices

Religious and other groups said the federal government did not always prevent or quell violence, often expressed along religious lines, or to protect victims of violent attacks targeted because of their religious beliefs. The government was not able to fully contain Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, or People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. Although the group changed its name to Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), it is still commonly referred to as Boko Haram, Hausa for "Western education is forbidden." International human rights organizations reported the government utilized heavy-handed tactics, including committing extrajudicial killings of suspected terrorists, torture, and allowing detainees to die in custody. According to observers, such tactics increased the support for Boko Haram. Human Rights Watch reported that eyewitnesses saw army troops kill at least 300 members of the IMN in Zaria, Kaduna State in December and bury them in mass graves, following an altercation at a roadblock that disrupted the convoy of the COAS. The military said IMN members attempted to assassinate the COAS, that only seven IMN members died, and that it acted within its rules of engagement. In a June report, Amnesty International called for nine military officers to be investigated for war crimes related to the conduct of counter-Boko Haram operations. Security forces raided the mosques or residences of small religious groups allegedly holding arms or engaging in other illegal activity. A sharia court sentenced nine people to death for blasphemy, and the case remained on appeal.

The federal government under the administrations of both Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari stated that it made efforts to confront Boko Haram, which led to progress in containing the group. The government increasingly cooperated with neighboring countries, established a military command center in the capital of Borno State, and provided military forces with supplies and weapons to fight Boko Haram. An offensive launched in February resulted in the recapture of the majority of the territory held by Boko Haram.

While Boko Haram continued to raid small towns and villages in remote areas of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, religious leaders and civil society groups reported the military was more likely to respond to attacks or threats of attack by Boko Haram than in the past. The group increasingly used suicide attacks and improvised explosive device rather than raids. Boko Haram fighters continued to target houses of worship and other buildings during these attacks.

International human rights groups and domestic NGOs accused security forces of heavy handedness in dealing with minority religious movements. Human Rights Watch said eyewitnesses reported at least 300 members of IMN were killed by Nigerian Army troops in Zaria, Kaduna State, from December 12-14, following an altercation at a roadblock at the Hussainiya Baqiyatullah religious center that blocked the convoy of the COAS. The IMN subsequently released a list that contained the names of 705 IMN members the group said were missing following the incident. Human rights groups corroborated statements from the IMN that, in the days after the clashes, Nigerian soldiers destroyed religiously significant IMN sites in Zaria, including the group's Hussainiya Baqiyatullah religious center and Darur Rahma cemetery. IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky remained in government custody while institutions including the National Human Rights Commission, National Assembly, and Kaduna State government established inquiries into the incident.

On June 25, a sharia court in Kano State announced it had sentenced eight men and one woman to death for blasphemy. During a religious gathering in honor of the founder of the Tijaniyyah group, the accused allegedly

made remarks elevating a former leader above the Prophet Muhammad. Prior to the sentencing, protesters calling for the deaths of the accused burned down a court building where the trial was being conducted, and threatened violence if the court acquitted the defendants. The court conducted the trial in secret and did not release the names of several of the accused. The case remained on appeal. Authorities did not carry out any capital punishments from sharia courts or sentences such as stoning or amputation during the year.

Christian groups said the government only occasionally investigated, prosecuted, and punished perpetrators of violence or other abuses of religious freedom, following a pattern of impunity throughout the country. There were no indictments or prosecutions following fatal attacks on religious leaders and institutions. The government's prosecution of suspected Boko Haram members was slow, and most suspects were held indefinitely. No suspected Boko Haram terrorists were reported to have been prosecuted during the year, and only eight have been prosecuted over the past five years, according to police.

During the year, the National Human Rights Commission did not release the results of the inquiry it launched into a 2014 incident in which the IMN clashed with members of the army. The conflict resulted in an estimated 35 deaths, including three of the sons of IMN leader Zakzaky. Army leadership, which stated that its soldiers acted in self-defense, also did not release the results of a promised investigation.

State and local authorities began to facilitate the return of displaced persons to towns recaptured from Boko Haram in the northeast, though humanitarian and civil society groups cautioned that security provisions were sometimes not adequate.

Some Christian groups reported a lack of protection by federal, state, and local authorities, especially in central regions, where there were long standing, violent disputes, many between Christians and Muslims, over land use and other political, economic, and ethnic issues. Herders, who were predominately Muslim and from the Fulani ethnic group, sometimes allowed their livestock to graze on property belonging to the farmers, who were predominately Christian and from other ethnic groups. Because of the close links among religion, ethnicity, and political and economic interests, it was difficult to categorize many of these incidents as based solely on religious identity.

In early September, religious, political, and civil society leaders organized protests in the national capital, Abuja, and Plateau State capital, Jos, to call on the federal government to take action to stop the frequent incidents of communal violence in the Barkin Ladi and Riyom areas outside Jos. The protestors said over 300 people were killed by such violence in both areas between May and August, including a May 2 attack suspected to have been carried out by Fulani herders on a Church of Christ in Nigeria church in Barkin Ladi. The attack killed the pastor and 26 others, including church members. The police said that gunmen, again described as Fulani herders, killed at least 45 people in a March 15 attack on Egba village in Benue State, whose residents are largely Christian, as part of a dispute over grazing rights. The press reported that presumed Fulani herders killed more than 100 people in the Logo area of Benue State, most of them Christian, on May 26 during a six-hour early morning attack targeting villages and camps hosting victims of earlier communal clashes in the state. No arrests related to these incidents were reported.

Following national and state elections in March and April newly-elected federal and state governments took preliminary steps to implement some of the recommendations by past government commissions for resolving disputes or reducing ethnoreligious tensions. President Buhari endorsed a Ministry of Agriculture proposal to create grazing reserves and livestock routes to mitigate clashes between Muslim herders and Christian farmers. State and federal governments cooperated to restore the presence of security forces in some ungoverned areas of the north that served as safe havens for cattle rustlers and armed robbers believed responsible for instigating some of the herder-farmer violence. The incoming governor of Kaduna State established a commission to address religiously motivated violence in southern Kaduna and implemented its recommendations, including eliminating the legal distinction in the state between "indigenes," long-term residents of the state, often farmers, and "settlers," more recent immigrants into the state, including most herders. Following the recommendations from religious and other leaders, the new governor of Plateau State convened a "stakeholders' alternative dispute resolution mechanism" composed of leaders of ethnic, religious, and other groups at the heart of the conflict in the state. These steps were not able to prevent the escalation of violent clashes in the state.

The Muslim Students Society of Nigeria appealed a 2014 ruling by the High Court in Lagos that upheld a ban on wearing the hijab in public primary and secondary schools except during religious classes and times set aside for prayer. The case remained on appeal. Muslim organizations condemned a suggestion by President Buhari during a December 30 press conference that the government would consider banning the hijab for security reasons, and a presidential spokesperson later clarified that there were no plans for a ban. Muslim groups said women wearing the hijab faced additional scrutiny from private security forces. Muslim groups said public school uniforms were too revealing and thus discriminated against their standards, particularly in the south. In some states, public school authorities prevented girls from wearing the hijab as part of their uniform and sometimes harassed girls who wore it outside of school grounds.

Authorities in some states reportedly denied building permits to minority religious communities for the construction of new places of worship, expansion and renovation of existing facilities, or reconstruction of buildings that had been demolished. Christians reported local community leaders, traditional rulers, and government officials in the predominantly Muslim northern states used regulations on zoning and title registrations to stop or slow the establishment of new churches.

Church leaders said they were able to evade such restrictions by purchasing and developing land in the name of an individual member of their congregation, but this practice left the church in a tenuous legal position. National media outlets reported in early January that the Katsina State government had threatened to demolish a historic church, producing a “religious crisis” in the state. Some of those involved, however, said the press reports were greatly exaggerated, as the dispute involved only a permit for the construction of a fence. An interfaith committee appointed by the state government helped resolve the fence issue, while Christian groups and the pastor of the church in question reported that interfaith relations remained close.

Some non-Muslims stated that government-funded sharia courts amounted to the adoption of Islam as a state religion, while the state governments maintained no person was compelled to use the sharia courts, citing the availability of a parallel common law court system. Christian groups stated non-Muslims were pressured to file cases in sharia courts and were more likely to receive unfavorable judgments in those courts.

In some states, sharia-based practices, such as the separation of the sexes in public schools and in health care, voting, and transportation facilities, affected non-Muslim minorities.

State governments in Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Niger, and Zamfara funded sharia law enforcement groups called the Hisbah, which Christian groups said enforced sharia inconsistently and sporadically, sometimes targeting Christians or residents of other states. While Hisbah groups were generally more lenient in areas set aside for Christians, visitors, or residents of other states, homes and businesses in predominantly Christian neighborhoods were sometimes raided as well. The Kano State Hisbah periodically arrested residents for alcohol consumption, begging, prostitution, and other purported violations of sharia.

On January 27, the Kano State Hisbah Board said it had arrested 12 young men who were planning what the board called a gay wedding in Kano, which the detainees said was a birthday party. On July 27, the Kano State Hisbah Board said it arrested 20 youths for misconduct including dressing “indecently” and having “long hair,” releasing them after scolding them and cutting their hair.

The Kano State Hisbah Board enforced sharia statutes banning public consumption and distribution of alcohol, particularly around Islamic holidays. On January 10, the Kano State Hisbah Board reported it had destroyed over 300,000 confiscated bottles of beer during the previous three years. Hisbah boards regularly sponsored mass wedding ceremonies for widows and divorcees. The Kano State Hisbah Board said in May that it had conducted nearly 5,000 weddings since 2012 and that the men were told they were not permitted to divorce their wives without permission from the Hisbah Board.

In advance of the March presidential elections and April National Assembly elections, civil society and religious groups expressed concerns about politicians exploiting religion for political gain. Then-Vice President Namadi Sambo sparked controversy at a February campaign event when he said his party had more Muslims in key posts than the All Progressives Congress party.

In January the leading candidates in the presidential election, Jonathan and Buhari, signed a nonviolence pledge known as the Abuja Peace Accord, which was organized by religious leaders, and the candidates reaffirmed it at a joint ceremony two days before the election. Responding to accusations that he would “Islamize” the country or express favoritism towards Muslims, Buhari spoke at several interfaith events to clarify that he supported sharia in matters of personal status only and pledged to protect religious freedom if elected. Buhari followed political convention by choosing a running mate who was not a member of his own religion, Evangelical Christian Pastor Yemi Osinbajo. Political opponents and some Muslim groups criticized then-President Jonathan for visiting churches to make policy announcements and campaign appearances in the weeks before the election. Commentators singled out some prominent clerics who appeared to endorse specific candidates in their sermons. Media reports indicated fewer people were killed during the year’s elections than any since 1999, including the aftermath of the 2011 elections, when Human Rights Watch reported more than 800 people were killed, some apparently targeted for religious reasons.

Christian groups reported individual administrators of government-run universities and technical schools in several northern states refused to admit Christian students or delayed the issuance of their degrees and licenses. Muslim and Christian groups said administrators blocked the construction of houses of worship for the nondominant religion on the campuses of public universities.

Prisoners were able to attend religious services and outside clergy and religious organizations constructed chapels or mosques in some prisons, but prisons reportedly did not have equal facilities for Muslim and Christian worship.

The federal government approved the use of air carriers for religious pilgrimages to Mecca for Muslims and to Jerusalem, Rome, or Greece for Christians, and subsidized both types of pilgrimages. It established airfares and negotiated bilateral air service agreements with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Italy to support pilgrimages. The National Hajj Commission provided logistical arrangements for approximately 85,000 pilgrims to Mecca. The Nigerian Christian Pilgrims Commission provided logistical arrangements for the travel of as many as 30,000 pilgrims to Jerusalem, Rome, and Greece. Multiple state governments ended their sponsorship of pilgrimages, due to budget constraints.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Boko Haram, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continued to commit acts of mass violence in its stated quest to impose its religious and political beliefs throughout the country, especially in the northeast. Boko Haram abuses included mass killings, mass kidnappings, sexual assault, forced conversion, and forced conscription. Data compiled by an NGO based on media reports indicate that nearly 9,000 people (including civilians and fighters on both sides) died in the country as a result of the conflict between Boko Haram and the government during the year, nearly as many as in 2014. Due to security concerns and a lack of resources, there were no independently verified estimates on casualties available, and casualty estimates varied widely across different sources.

Boko Haram's attacks included indiscriminate as well as targeted acts of violence. The majority of Boko Haram's victims were Muslim. The group deliberately targeted Christians as well as Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their radical ideology. At least 16 people were killed when Boko Haram gunmen attacked a mosque in Jos, the capital of Plateau State, during a Ramadan sermon. The attack was an apparent attempt to assassinate the mosque's cleric, who had previously spoken out against the group. Believing the attack to have been carried out by Christians, Muslim youths retaliated by burning down two small nearby churches, which were later rebuilt with the assistance of local Christian and Muslim residents.

Boko Haram claimed responsibility for scores of fatal attacks on churches and mosques, often killing worshipers during religious services or immediately afterward. In April Boko Haram fighters dressed as preachers lured residents of a small village in Borno State to a local mosque to kill them, resulting in at least 24 deaths. In July a Boko Haram suicide bomber disguised as a worshipper killed a pastor and five others at a church in Potiskum, Yobe State. Two Boko Haram suicide bombers killed more than 40 people worshipping at a mosque in Molai, outside Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, in October. Maiduguri residents told the press they were avoiding congregating for prayers, as they were seen as targets for Boko Haram.

There were multiple confirmed reports Boko Haram had targeted individuals and communities because of their religious beliefs, including Christians in remote areas of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, as well as members of Shia and Izala mosques. Boko Haram claimed credit for a November 27 suicide bombing attack on a Shia religious procession passing through Dakasoye, Kano State, killing at least 21 people. Survivors and relatives of victims said Boko Haram fighters had screened and killed Christians during raids or at checkpoints and killed Christians who refused to renounce their beliefs and convert. In some areas it controlled, Boko Haram killed fighting age men, committed sexual violence against women, and destroyed or occupied churches, among other crimes.

Boko Haram also engaged in kidnappings of women and girls for purposes of forced marriage or sexual exploitation, including more than 200 mostly Christian girls kidnapped in 2014 from the Government Girls' Secondary School in Chibok, in Borno State. These and numerous other captives abducted during the conflict remained unaccounted for at the end of the year. Other women whom Boko Haram had abducted later reported they were forced to convert in order to legitimize their "marriage" to their captors, and those who refused to convert were subjected to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and forced labor. In March residents of Bama reported that Boko Haram fighters killed their captive "wives" as they fled the town, in order to prevent them from marrying "infidels."

Boko Haram continued to carry out regular suicide bombings and other attacks in major urban areas in the north. The military retook many of the large towns in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States that Boko Haram had captured for months, including Bama, Damboa, Gwoza, and Mubi. In early January, human rights groups reported that Boko Haram had shot hundreds of civilians and destroyed thousands of buildings in and around the town of Baga, after overrunning a military base there.

Boko Haram burned down or otherwise destroyed many churches and mosques, often in villages it raided or occupied. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria said in July that Boko Haram had destroyed approximately 850 churches during the conflict. A resident said suspected Boko Haram fighters burned down all 32 churches in the village of Mussa in Borno State during a July 3 attack. Boko Haram burned down a mosque belonging to Izala Muslims in a January attack on Damaturu, the capital of Borno State. President Buhari pledged to help rebuild the churches and mosques destroyed by Boko Haram in the northeast, once security forces restored peace.

Tens of thousands of refugees remained in neighboring countries after having fled the violence in the northeast, and approximately 2.1 million residents remained internally displaced. The Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri reported that approximately 100,000 of its members were among those displaced in recent years, in addition to 5,000 members killed, and 350 churches destroyed.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslims and Christians continued to fear discrimination or abuse based on their religious affiliation. Muslim and Christian leaders reported there continued to be a lack of trust between members of the two faiths as a result of the ongoing conflict in the northeast. Churches and mosques hired private security or took additional security measures in response to attacks and bombings.

Some Muslims or Christians who converted to another religion reportedly faced threats and ostracism by adherents of their former religion. In some northern states, those wishing to convert to Islam were strongly encouraged to apply to the sharia council for a letter of conversion to be sent to their families, which served to dissolve pre-existing marriages to Christians, and to request Hisbah protection from reprisals by relatives. Similar procedures did not exist for Muslims converting to Christianity or renouncing their faith. On April 1, Muslim youths angry at a young convert to Islam who returned to Christianity burned down a Baptist church and pastor's residence in Rogo, Kano State, severely injuring two men and causing the death of the pastor's daughter from smoke inhalation. Days later, police detained 15 youths suspected to be involved in the attack. A Muslim traditional leader provided funds to reconstruct the church. A Christian group involved in the case reported the attention led to increased awareness and responsiveness from local authorities to similar religious freedom incidents, including threatening and harassing religious minorities in the area.

Communities sometimes stigmatized those who did not believe in the existence of a divine being. For example, some secular humanists reported they felt the need to hide their identities and feign religious devotion to avoid threats of violence. Atheists also said they faced ostracism by families, mistreatment in school, and discrimination by employers.

While the law prohibits religious discrimination in employment and other activities, religious groups continued to say some employers discriminated in the work place on the basis of religion. Muslim women in the south who wore the hijab reportedly continued to face job discrimination in the private sector, especially in customer service positions.

Societal views on the hijab reportedly created friction. After women dressed in hijabs began to carry out suicide bombings in the northeast in 2014, Muslim organizations said that Muslim women faced societal discrimination and pressure to abandon the hijab. When some commentators called for a ban on the hijab in response to the escalation in Boko Haram's use of female suicide bombers and to the announcement of bans in neighboring countries during the year, the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria and other Muslim groups opposed any ban and characterized the focus on the hijab as "diversionary."

Many religious leaders publicly supported tolerance and interfaith methods of conflict resolution. For example, Catholic Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja and Sultan Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar III of Sokoto, Nigeria's paramount Muslim leader, formed the Interfaith Initiative for Peace (IIP) to promote interfaith dialogue. Under the IIP, they held conferences and released joint messages encouraging interfaith dialogue and condemning hate speech in advance of the March 28 presidential elections. They were also members of the National Peace Committee, which helped facilitate the Abuja Peace Accord. Numerous local, national, and international organizations, many of which were organized by interfaith organizations or included religious themes, campaigned for a peaceful election.

Some religious leaders reported distrust between Christian and Muslim communities (and discord among groups within the same faith tradition) could threaten interfaith efforts. The independent Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), comprised of Christian and Muslim leaders, again did not meet during the year, to the reported frustration of many Muslim and Christian leaders.

Internally displaced persons and religious groups said they anticipated tension between Christians and Muslims in the northeast, as those who were displaced began to return to their home communities but reportedly felt uncomfortable again living alongside people of other faiths whom they saw as complicit in the violence.

Muslim leaders regularly publicly condemned the activities of Boko Haram as un-Islamic and disassociated themselves from the ideology and actions of the group. In a public message, Sultan Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III said the insurgency "is against the tenets of Islam and it is against the cultures and norms of Muslims in Nigeria and the world over." The umbrella body for Nigerian Muslims released a statement in July

following Boko Haram attacks during Ramadan that dissociated Nigerian Muslims from Boko Haram and condemned the attacks “in the strongest terms,” calling them “barbaric.”

Muslim groups unsuccessfully advocated for the national government to declare the Hijra, the first day of the year in the Islamic calendar, as a national holiday for all citizens.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy staff promoted religious freedom and tolerance in discussions with government officials throughout the year. The embassy met with civil society and religious leaders about religious freedom and, along with the consulate general, regularly distributed information on religious freedom to journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, civic organizations, teachers, students, government officials, the armed forces, clergy, and traditional rulers.

During the July 20 visit by President Buhari and his advisors to Washington, President Obama and other senior officials said the United States was prepared to increase support for a holistic effort by the government to counter Boko Haram while protecting human rights and working to eliminate the factors that fuel violent extremism.

During two visits to the country, the Secretary of State encouraged senior government officials to prevent electoral violence as well as to address the conflict with Boko Haram and ethnoreligious clashes in the center of the country. Over the course of the year, the Ambassador and more than 10 other visiting U.S. officials met with civil society groups and Christian, Muslim, and other religious leaders to show public support for the rights and concerns of these communities.

The U.S. Special Envoy and Coordinator for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications visited Abuja in August to meet with government leaders, including President Buhari, regarding efforts to counter violent extremism. The Special Envoy also met with civil society, community, and religious leaders, including the Sultan of Sokoto, to explore ways to combat extremist activities.

The U.S. Consul General in Lagos discussed religious tolerance and interfaith relationship-building on multiple occasions with leaders of the growing Pentecostal Christian movement, other Christian leaders, and influential Muslim clerics. The consulate general cosponsored an event to reinforce counter-violent extremism messages from academic, religious, and humanitarian perspectives.

As part of the embassy’s and consulate general’s work to promote nonviolent elections, the Ambassador worked with religious leaders and others to facilitate peace agreements between the two major presidential candidates, as well as between the gubernatorial candidates in Rivers and Lagos states.

The embassy continued carrying out a conflict management and mitigation project aimed at building interfaith networks to reduce ethnoreligious conflict and improve religious tolerance. The project expanded its scope to carry out north-south interfaith and interethnic interventions to address misconceptions and reprisals arising from ethnoreligious violence.