



U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Nigeria

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NIGERIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

Until May 1999, Nigeria was ruled by a military junta without benefit of a constitution or legislature; the suspended 1979 Constitution provided for freedom of religion, but the military Government restricted this right in practice in certain respects. In May the military transferred power to an elected civilian Government that rules subject to a new Constitution that took effect on May 29 and is based largely on the 1979 Constitution. The new civilian Government generally has respected religious freedom in practice, although its ability to enforce respect for religious freedom or to prevent violence between Muslims and non-Muslims in all cases remains uncertain. Although the Government has never outlawed proselytizing, it continued to discourage and criticize it publicly, in the belief that it stimulates religious tensions. Both the 1979 and the never-implemented 1989 constitutions prohibit state and local governments from adopting an official religion.

About half the country's population practice Islam, about 40 percent practice Christianity, and about 10 percent practice exclusively traditional indigenous religions or no religion; many persons practice both elements of Christianity or Islam and elements of an indigenous traditional religion. The predominant form of Islam in the country is Sunni. The Christian population includes Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and a growing number of followers of evangelical Pentecostal groups. Catholics constitute the largest Christian denomination. There is some correlation between religious differences and ethnic and regional differences. The north, which is dominated by the large Hausa and Fulani (Peuhl) ethnic groups, is predominantly Muslim, with significant populations of Christians in urban centers, particularly in Kaduna and Jos. In the southwest, where the large Yoruba ethnic group is dominant, there is no dominant religion; Islam is practiced by a plurality, but probably not a majority, of the population of the largest cities of the region, due in part to Hausa and Fulani communities in those cities. Many Yorubas practice Islam, many practice Christianity, and many continue to practice the traditional Yoruba religion, which includes both belief in a single supreme deity and the worship of lesser deities believed to serve as the agents of that supreme deity with respect to specific aspects of life. In the east, where the large Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Catholics are in the majority.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country and do not face restrictions specifically designed to deter their activities. Many missionary groups have noted bureaucratic delays and obstruction and attempts to extort money for the processing of necessary residence permits for foreigners; however,

many foreign businesses and other nonreligious organizations also have encountered similar difficulties.

Both Christian and Muslim organizations alleged that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Immigration Department restricted the entry into the country of certain religious practitioners, particularly persons suspected of intending to proselytize.

There were occasional reports of harassment of Christian missions by local government officials in predominantly Islamic regions. In April and again in August 1998, the local council of Lafia, in Nasarawa State, reportedly ordered the closure of a Protestant Christian mission church in connection with a dispute about the mission's title to the land. In March 1998, State Security Service officers reportedly detained and interrogated the mission's pastor. The mission seeks to convert members of the generally Islamic Kambari ethnic group.

Rough estimates put the number of foreign missionaries at over 1,000, with many in the area around Jos, in Plateau State. The main Christian missionary groups include Jesuits, Dominicans, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), the Church of Christ, and the Society for International Missions.

The Government continued to enforce a 1987 ban on religious organizations on campuses of primary schools, although individual students retain the right to practice their religions in recognized places of worship.

Although distribution of religious publications remained unrestricted, the Government continued to enforce lightly a ban on published religious advertisements.

Religious programming on television and radio was closely controlled by the Abacha regime, but this restriction appears to have ended. Since Abacha's death, government efforts to control religious broadcasts largely ceased. One exception was the interruption of a broadcast on the state-controlled Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Channel 7 of a radical Pentecostal preacher in February 1999. Televangelist preacher Tunde Bakare had his transmission cut off in the midst of heated criticism of the military Government's program for a return to civilian rule, in which he alleged that the main presidential candidate would be assassinated by the armed forces.

After the death of General Abacha, the military Government ceased to enforce a previous de facto restriction on open-air religious services away from places of worship but did require application for a police permit for such services. Large outdoor religious gatherings are a common occurrence in Nigeria. In March 1998, Pope John Paul II visited Nigeria. On December 18, 1998, a large religious revival meeting in Lagos organized by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the "Lekki Visitation '98," gathered a congregation estimated between 1 and 2 million persons.

On May 25, 1998, an editor with Ogun State television (OSTV) was briefly detained and suspended indefinitely without pay for allegedly approving the broadcast of a statement issued by the Ogun State chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). State officials considered the statement asking Christians to boycott a government-organized prayer program in Abuja to be offensive.

Incidents of religious violence, either motivated by or resulting in government intervention, occurred throughout the period covered by this report and affected both Islamic and Christian groups. The Government's 2-year detention of Shi'a leader Ibrahim El-Zakzaky sparked demonstrations in several northern cities. El-Zakzaky, the leader of the country's Islamic Movement (also known as the "Muslim Brotherhood") had been detained since 1996 on charges of "inciting disaffection against the government" and operating an illegal radio station. El-Zakzaky had published a Hausa-language magazine article arguing that "There is no government but Islam." Arrested more than four times since 1981, El-Zakzaky has spent 9 of the last 18 years in prison. El-Zakzaky often has advocated the Islamization of the State.

On January 30, 1998, security forces in Kaduna broke up a demonstration demanding El-Zakzaky's release, reportedly killing three demonstrators. On April 17, 1998, Hajia Zeinet Ibrahim, a wife of El-Zakzaky, was arrested in Kaduna by government security forces. Amnesty International reported that Ibrahim was among eight women and six children who were arrested as a result of their alleged participation in pro-El-Zakzaky demonstrations. During their detention, numerous demonstrations took place in support of those arrested. On April 18, eight persons reportedly died in a clash between demonstrators and police in Kaduna. In August 1998, the Islamic Movement appealed to then-Head of State General Abdulsalami Abubakar to release the members of their group and submitted a list of 102 names. In Kano on September 18, 1998, police fired on a group of Shi'ite demonstrators who were protesting the continued detention of El-Zakzaky and reportedly killed five persons. On December 4, 1998, the Kaduna State attorney general withdrew all charges against El-Zakzaky and three others. All four were released on December 17, 1998. Other releases followed. On April 30, 1999, a Kaduna-based human rights group appealed publicly for the Government to release 31 remaining detainees being held in prisons in Kaduna, Katsina, Borno, and Niger States. By the end of June 1999, at least 71 of the 102 alleged detained had been released. After his release, El-Zakzaky explained that his followers were not tortured or beaten and were treated no worse than "non-political" prisoners. However, all prisoners in the country face life-threatening prison health conditions and overcrowding, and two members of the Islamic Movement reportedly died of tuberculosis while in Lapai prison, in Niger State.

A police attack on the "Maitisin" Islamic group in Lagos on May 27, 1998, led to 12 deaths. Members of the group allegedly had assaulted a neighbor. Residents of the area said that members of the cult had migrated from Niger about eight years earlier.

There was modest improvement in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, due largely to a general increase in government respect for human rights, including freedom of expression, assembly and association, since the death of military dictator Sani Abacha in June 1998.

There were no reports of persons who were detained or imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs. The 31 followers of El-Zakzaky who are in detention are being held on various charges, including "disrespect for constituted authority," "unlawful assembly, public disturbances, rioting," "preaching without a permit and incitive preaching," and "unlawful entry and trespass into a mosque." Nigerian human rights groups consider El-Zakzaky's followers to be political detainees and not persons imprisoned on the basis of their religious beliefs.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Nigerian law prohibits religious discrimination. Nonetheless, reports were common that government officials discriminated against persons practicing a religion different from their own, notably in hiring or awarding contracts. Private businesses are frequently guilty of informal religious discrimination in their hiring practices and purchasing patterns.

Religious differences often correspond to regional and ethnic differences. For example, the northern region is overwhelmingly Muslim, as are the large Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups of that area. Many southern ethnic groups are predominantly Christian. Consequently, it is often difficult to distinguish religious discrimination from ethnic and regional discrimination, which is pervasive.

Religious tensions between Muslims and Christians, and between Sunni Muslims and the small Shi'a minority, repeatedly have erupted into local violence in the past. These tensions continued to contribute to several instances of violence during 1988 and early 1999.

There were clashes in northern regions between Shi'a Muslim groups and Sunni Muslims which resulted in deaths and injuries.

In Borno State during February and March 1999, fighting between Christians and Muslims over the issue of religious instruction in schools led to several deaths. Sporadic incidents of attacks on individual religious leaders were reported, but the nature and perpetrators of the attacks varied widely, and there was no distinguishable pattern of one religious group attacking another. Unlike some past periods, during the period covered by this report, there were few recent attacks by Muslims on Christians in northern regions that were related directly to religious differences. However, there were isolated retribution attacks on Yorubas, some of them Christian, for the killings of Hausas by Yorubas in Lagos on July 7-10, 1998. These killings took place during interethnic violence following the death in detention of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba who apparently had won the 1993 presidential election but whom the armed forces had not allowed to become President.

The clergy of a Protestant Christian mission in a largely Muslim area in Nasarawa State reportedly alleged that societal intimidation and fear of attack had led some converts to stop attending church, and that the mission had relocated several families of converts due to concern about their safety. However, there were no known reports of societal violence to enforce the Islamic prohibition against apostasy.

In May 1999, in Kafanchan, a town near the center of the country, about 130 persons reportedly were killed, and many houses and businesses were destroyed, in riots that apparently resulted from both religious and ethnic differences. During the late 18th century, members of the Islamicized Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups conquered the area around Kafanchan and subjugated its inhabitants, who mostly practiced traditional indigenous religions. Most members of the subjugated indigenous tribes are now Christians, although some continue to follow traditional indigenous religions. On May 22,

1999, indigenous non-Muslims protested the installation of a 12th consecutive Hausa-Fulani emir as their traditional ruler and demanded a traditional chief of their own. Some of them used firebombs against the emir's palace and ransacked local Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo businesses, wielding guns, arrows, spears, and swords. Police and military forces suppressed the riot on May 23. Similar rioting in Kafanchan in 1987 and 1995 had resulted in the creation of some chiefdoms for some but not all of the largely Christian indigenous ethnic groups in the emirate.

During the period covered by this report, human rights groups reported increasing violence between different Pentecostal groups, often involving individual preachers or ministers. In Zaria, a minister from one such group reportedly shot and killed a rival evangelical church's minister. Other incidents involved congregations, or individual members of the hierarchy of church groups, murdering ministers in disputes over money.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials frequently discussed the political and social situation with various religious leaders, who play a prominent role in civil society and in the human rights community. Since the end of the Abacha regime in mid-1998, embassy officers have discussed religious freedom issues with government officials in the context of the Embassy's overall efforts to promote respect for human rights, and they often have discussed with government officials the concerns of religious leaders about the political transition and other issues involving the Government.

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