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2022 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 constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law in addition to common law civil courts, although civil courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil courts. In addition to civil courts, sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, and customary courts in most of the 36 states.

Civil society organizations and media stated that general insecurity was prevalent throughout the country, particularly in the North West region. There continued to be frequent violent incidents, particularly in the northern part of the country, affecting both Muslims and Christians, resulting in numerous deaths. Kidnappings and armed robbery by criminal gangs increased in the South as well as the North West, the South South, and the South East. The international Christian organization Open Doors stated that terrorist groups, militant herdsman, and criminal gangs were responsible for large numbers of fatalities, and Christians were particularly vulnerable. Senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders made statements criticizing what they said was the government's inaction in the face of continued widespread violence. Following a violent incident in March, the Catholic Bishops' Conference in a statement asked the federal government to arrest and prosecute those responsible and said that Nigerians are "sick of flimsy excuses and bogus promises to deal with terrorists in the country." Sultan of Sokoto Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar III, the senior Muslim cleric in the country, said after the same incident that any government that "cannot provide security for its citizens had no moral justification to exist." The government continued security operations that authorities stated were meant to stem the insecurity and violence throughout the country. In March, governors of all 36 states resolved to establish peacebuilding agencies and adopt a multilevel policing framework to respond to the high level of insecurity in the country. On August 8, according to the outlawed Shia organization Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), characterized by the government as a violent extremist Shia group and whose announced aim is for an Islamic state, security forces fired on a Muharram procession in Zaria, Kaduna State, killing six Shia Muslims. Throughout the year, officials in northern states continued to enforce laws criminalizing blasphemy, a term inclusive of laws prohibiting intentional insult to religion, which are treated separately as they form part of state penal codes, sentencing individuals to maximum penalties. In December, Kano State authorities convicted Muslim cleric Sheikh

Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara on four counts of capital blasphemy and sentenced him to death for comments he made during a television debate in 2021, which were interpreted as disparaging the Prophet Muhammad. In August, the Federal Court of Appeal in Kano State rejected the appeal of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu and ordered that his case be retried in Kano Sharia Court. Sharif-Aminu, a Tijani Sufi lyricist, was convicted of capital blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2020 based on the words of one of his songs. In November, Sharif-Aminu filed an appeal of the retrial at the Supreme Court of Nigeria. In July in Bauchi State, a sharia court sentenced three men to death by stoning for homosexual conduct; the sentence was stayed pending appeal. Observers noted that no executions from sharia penal code sentences have been carried out since 1999, when sharia penal codes in 12 northern states began being implemented. In April, the presiding judge of the Kano State High Court sentenced president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison after he pled guilty to 18 counts of insulting religion with the intent to “cause a breach of public peace.” Violence erupted at a publicly sponsored Baptist high school in Kwara State in February when the school refused to allow Muslim students to wear hijabs in school. In June, the Supreme Court ruled in response to a similar 2019 case from Lagos State that the constitution allows Muslim students to wear hijabs in all state-sponsored or affiliated schools. Jewish groups reported discrimination over their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays and the government’s lack of religious accommodation.

Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA), attacked population centers and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian targets across the North East, according to observers. According to media reports, in January and February, ISIS-WA attacked several villages in Borno State, killing at least seven persons, abducting 24 others, and burning churches, mosques, and other buildings. Observers also reported that ISIS-WA efforts to implement shadow governance structures were reduced to the fringes of Lake Chad in the extreme North East. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Crisis Group, ISIS-WA “has not shied away from cruelly punishing those it sees as contravening its interpretation of Sharia, amputating the hands of alleged thieves and killing adulterers, and on several occasions, it has massacred civilians suspected of supporting the government or in communities that refused to pay taxes or disobeyed orders. It has also been ruthless toward the Christian minority in north-eastern Nigeria, probably partly to demonstrate its loyalty to ISIS.”

According to NGOs and press reports, during the year, the level of violence and insecurity increased, including in the predominantly Muslim North West, where expanded numbers of criminal groups carried out thousands of killings, kidnappings, and armed robberies. Because issues of religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as targeting individuals because of their religious identity. While much of the violence involved predominantly Muslim herders and, depending on location, either predominantly Christian or Muslim farmers, multiple academic and media sources including the NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) said banditry and other criminality, not animosity between particular religious groups or on the basis of religion, were the primary drivers of intercommunal violence. According to information on its website, ACLED reported 3,953 civilian deaths from violence across the country during the year, compared with 3,699 in 2021, including an increase in violence against Christians, which comprised 5 percent of all violence. ACLED reported that a spike in attacks against Christians that began in previous years continued into 2022, but that overall, Christians were not the primary target of political violence in the country in terms of numbers of incidents. The NGO Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) stated that 32,000 Muslims had been killed over the previous three years because of terrorist attacks in the north of the country and accused Christian groups of “deceiv[ing] the world by claiming that it is Christians alone who are being killed in Nigeria.” There were instances of mob violence against clergy and members of religious groups and mass

killings of Muslims and Christians that press reports and observers described as planned and carried out by organized groups. On June 5, attackers killed an estimated 50 persons, including many children, at the St. Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, during a Pentecost Sunday service. On September 23, a gang of armed men killed at least 15 persons at a mosque in Zamfara State. In May, a mob overpowered school security and killed a Christian student in Sokoto who had posted a message on social media that some fellow students deemed as intentionally disparaging to religious sensitivities. Mob attackers widely circulated the video of her killing on social media. There were numerous kidnappings, both of clergy and members of religious groups. In separate incidents in September, militants attacked Cherubim and Seraphim churches in Niger and Kaduna States and abducted approximately 120 individuals. In September, gunmen kidnapped dozens of worshippers attending Friday afternoon prayers at a mosque in Zamfara State.

U.S. embassy and consulate general in Lagos officials and visiting U.S. government representatives met with senior government officials and raised issues such as the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases, the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and social trust, reports of societal abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion, and the role of religious leaders in national elections scheduled for February 2023. These included meetings with senior government officials such as Vice President Yemi Osinbajo and Presidential Chief of Staff Ibrahim Gambari, cabinet ministers including the Attorney General and Foreign and Interior Ministers, and National Assembly members. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials regularly met with interfaith and religious groups across the country, including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Society for the Support of Islam (JNI), the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council. They met with religious leaders in Kano, Kwara, Edo, Lagos, Imo, Rivers, Anambra, and Enugu States to discuss and encourage efforts to promote peace and religious tolerance in those states. The embassy continued to fund peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states, such as Kaduna and Plateau, and interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states. The embassy concluded five small grants to faith-based and community organizations to support reconciliation in communities, primarily in the North Central region, experiencing ethnoreligious violence.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 225.1 million (midyear 2022). According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2015, the country is 50 percent Muslim and 48.1 percent Christian, while approximately 2 percent belong to other or no religious groups. Many individuals syncretize indigenous animism or traditional practices with Islam or Christianity.

In its most recent detailed surveys in 2010 and 2012, Pew found 38 percent of Muslims self-identify as Sunni, most of whom belong to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, although a sizable minority follows the Shafi'i school of *fiqh*. This corresponds to the 37 percent of Muslims who identify either with Sufism, of which the largest brotherhoods are the Tijaniyyah (19 percent) and Qadriyyah (9 percent), or Salafism, known in the country as Izala. The same studies found 12 percent of Muslims self-identify as Shia, with the remainder declining to answer or identifying as "something else" (5 percent) or "just a Muslim" (42 percent). There are also small numbers of Mouride Sufis, as well as Ahmadiyya and Kala Kato (Quraniyoon) Muslims.

According to a 2011 Pew Center report, Catholics comprise approximately 25 percent of Christians, and Protestants and other Christians approximately 75 percent. According to CAN, mainline Protestants, including Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and others, together account for

approximately 25 to 30 percent of the Christian population; Pentecostals, approximately 30 percent; evangelical Christians, including the Fellowship of Churches of Christ and Evangelical Church Winning All Fellowship, approximately 10 percent; and African Instituted Churches, including the Christ Apostolic Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, and other indigenous Aladura or “white garment” churches, 5 to 10 percent of the Christian population. There are numerous nondenominational churches and smaller Christian groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Rosicrucians, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other religious communities include Baha’is, Hindus (including members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Sikhs, Buddhists, animists, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

There are Jewish communities in Abuja and Lagos led by the Chabad Lubavitch movement and comprised mostly of foreign residents. A larger community of Nigerian Jews – dividing themselves among Messianic, Sabbatarian, Community of Hashem, and Orthodox congregations – is present primarily in the South East and South South regions of the country.

Islam is the dominant religion in the North West and North East regions, although significant Christian populations reside there as well. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North Central region. Christianity is the dominant religion in the South West, including Lagos, which is also home to significant Muslim populations.

In the South East region, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the South South, Christians form a substantial majority. There are small but growing numbers of Muslims in the South South and South East.

Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the North Central and South East, South South, and South West regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja. The Shia Muslim presence is heavily concentrated in the North West region.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution stipulates that neither the federal nor state governments shall establish a state religion and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one’s religion and to manifest and propagate religion “in worship, teaching, practice, and observance,” provided these rights are consistent with the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health, and protecting the rights of others. The constitution also states it shall be the duty of the state to encourage interfaith marriages and to promote the formation of associations that cut across religious lines and promote “national integration.” It prohibits political parties that limit membership based on religion or have names that have a religious connotation. The constitution highlights religious tolerance, among other qualities, as a distinct component of the “national ethic.”

The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law, in addition to common law civil (i.e., secular) courts, although civil courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil courts. In addition to civil courts, sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states. The nature of a case and the consent of the parties usually determine what type of court has jurisdiction. The constitution specifically recognizes sharia courts for noncriminal proceedings, but state laws do not compel participation in sharia courts

in noncriminal cases. All citizens, regardless of faith, have the option to have their civil cases tried in secular or sharia courts. In addition to noncriminal matters, sharia courts also hear criminal cases if both the complainant and defendant are Muslim and agree to the venue. Zamfara State law makes it mandatory for all Muslims to utilize sharia courts in such cases, but not in noncriminal cases. In all states with sharia penal codes, criminal cases with possible sentences of death or life in prison are only appealed from sharia to secular courts.

Sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including for serious criminal offenses for which the Quran and Islamic law provide *hudud* punishments, such as caning, amputation, and stoning. Sharia penal code offenses and charges are only applicable to Muslims. Sharia courts operate under similar rules as common law courts, including requirements for *mens rea* (culpable mental state) and other due process considerations. According to the chief registrar of the Kano Sharia Court, by law, defendants have the right to legal representation in all cases, and certain high crimes require the testimonies of four witnesses to be considered as admissible, corroborative evidence. Defendants have the right to challenge the constitutionality of sharia criminal sentences through common law appellate courts, and these courts have sometimes found for the plaintiffs in cases where they have sued individual states for assault for penalties, such as caning, imposed by sharia courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the sharia panel of the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who, while not required to have any formal training in the sharia penal code, often do and may seek advice from sharia experts.

According to the federal penal code, any person who carries out 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 misdemeanor” and may be subject to imprisonment for two years. The federal penal code does not define such acts as blasphemy. Intentionally insulting religion to cause offense is criminalized as a misdemeanor through state criminal and penal codes. In state criminal and penal codes, penalties may include imprisonment of two or five years and/or fines.

In the 12 states with sharia penal codes, blasphemy, defined as the willful insulting or incitement of contempt of any religion is a crime applicable only to Muslims that may incur sentences such as a fine, imprisonment, or both. In those states, Muslims may be accused of capital blasphemy if they are deemed to have insulted, incited, or shown public contempt for “the Holy Quran or any prophet,” for which they may receive the death penalty. While the death penalty has been imposed, it has never been carried out for such cases since sharia penal codes were first approved in public referenda in 1999. The various states’ sharia penal codes do not prohibit apostasy or heresy.

The Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) authorizes the federal government to intervene in the management of private entities and gives it broad and discretionary powers to withdraw, cancel, or revoke the certificate of any business or association; suspend and remove trustees (and appoint any one of their choice to manage the organization “in the public interest”); take control of finances of any association; and merge two associations without the consent and approval of their members.

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction – known as Christian religious knowledge and Islamic religious knowledge – in public schools. The constitution prohibits schools from requiring students to receive religious instruction or to participate in or attend any religious ceremony or observance pertaining to any religion other than their own. Some state education laws also protect students’ rights to be excused from religious instruction entirely. State officials and many religious leaders have stated that students have the right to request

a teacher of their own religious beliefs if the school does not offer an appropriate Christian or Islamic religious knowledge course. The constitution also states that no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place of education maintained wholly by that community. The law requires schools that receive state funding (state schools) to admit and accommodate students of all faiths or no faith, regardless of the student's or school's religious affiliation. Christian state schools are required to allow Muslim students to wear a hijab. In Muslim state schools, the hijab is required of all female students, regardless of religion, as part of the uniform.

Katsina and Kaduna States have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools. In Katsina State, the law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including by issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison, a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$1,100), or both for operating without a license. In Kaduna State, the Interfaith Preaching Council issues permits to those who wish to preach in public and regulates against the use of foul, demeaning, or derogatory language against individuals or other religions based on recommendations from the Local Government Interfaith Committee. Violators of the law are subject to fines and/or two to five years' imprisonment. Other states and local government areas establish their own modalities for licensing public preachers but do not license religious organizations.

In the states of Kano, Zamfara, and Sokoto, legally established Hisbah Boards or commissions have a mandate to ensure public compliance of Muslims with sharia penal codes and regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching and license imams. Hisbah agents also attempt to resolve interpersonal and family disputes between Muslims in those states and work with police to enforce the respective states' sharia penal code. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, Kano, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs commissions, ministries, or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Civil society organizations and media stated that general insecurity again increased and was prevalent throughout the country, particularly in the North West region. Kidnapping and armed robbery by criminal gangs increased in the South as well as the North West, the South South and South East regions. According to the Nigeria security tracker maintained by the Council on Foreign Relations, there were an estimated 10,755 deaths across the country from violent conflict during the year, compared with 10,399 in 2021. Of the deaths during the year, the council estimated 3,699 resulted from violence against civilians, including interethnic conflict and as a result of criminal armed gangs.

A report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime on farmer-herder violence and instability in Zamfara and Plateau States noted that "contestations over indigene rights" and "clashes over land between Fulani pastoralists and farmers" have been interpreted as attempts by Hausa-Fulani to continue "jihad" against indigenous persons, thus fueling further attacks and retaliatory episodes. The report stated that fears of "Islamization" – a "popular narrative among Christians" are unfounded and without evidence. In a May report, Open Doors cited a report by local research firm SBM Intelligence that captured aggregate statistics on conflict-related deaths without breakdown by religion to highlight the likely deaths of Christians and stated that in some instances terrorist groups, militant herders, and bandits "are evidently acting in cooperation with one another."

In January, a group of researchers from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point released a report entitled, *Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad?* Based on extensive fieldwork, the report explored the links between the country's criminal gangs and jihadi organizations in the North West region. While noting the "ethnic dimension" of criminal activity in the North West varied, the report found that "religion is not the most salient dimension ..." as both the criminals and "the large majority of their victims are Sunni Muslim." It noted that jihadi groups had not staged a mass kidnapping of schoolchildren in the country since February 2018. The report found that criminal gang activity in the region "required no substantive ideological justifications and carried no constraints," with criminals robbing, killing, and abducting individuals of all ethnic groups, religions, ages, and both genders. While acknowledging that religion was one of several salient factors in some conflicts in the North, the report observed "There is a tendency in Nigerian media (which is dominated by southerners) and among certain international commentators to reduce these factors to a narrative of Islamist extremists or jihadis committing ethnoreligious cleansing of Christians. Evidence that (Boko Haram) is driving the conflicts is generally weak."

On April 1, during his Friday sermon at Juma'at Mosque at Apo legislative quarters in Abuja, Chief Imam Nuru Khalid criticized the government for what he said was its inadequacy in dealing with the country's security situation, amid attacks by nonstate actors. Khalid called on the electorate not to vote for any politician who could not guarantee the safety of lives and properties. On April 3, the mosque committee suspended Khalid for his "overtly political" public comments.

During the year, there were several statements from senior religious leaders critical of the country's leadership regarding public security. On April 4, following a violent March 28 attack on the Abuja-Kaduna train route, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria put out a statement, "Nigeria: A Nation Groans in Pains," which asked the federal government to arrest and prosecute those "terrorizing innocent Nigerians, rather than playing the ostrich on matters of insecurity." They said that Nigerians are "sick of flimsy excuses and bogus promises to deal with terrorists in the country." They also stated, "All these atrocities against the people and the nation happen without a single arrest or prosecution [and] seem to give credibility to the widespread belief that the government is complacent, helpless or compromising." Responding to the same train attack, on April 4, the JNI, led by the Sultan of Sokoto, issued a statement stating that any government that "cannot provide security for its citizens had no moral justification to exist." In his Easter homily, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Matthew Kukah accused the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari of dividing Nigerians based on ethnicity, religion, and region. In response, Garba Shehu, President Buhari's spokesperson, accused Kukah of hatred for the Buhari administration and using the pulpit to "play politics." In July during his installment as CAN president, Archbishop Daniel Okoh of the Christ Holy Church International requested that President Buhari "end the bloodletting, kidnapping and general insecurity in all the geo-political zones of the country. I believe that the government can do more to secure the lives and property, given all the modern technology within its reach. Insecurity is a common concern for all of us, but as Christians we will continue to remain confident in the fact that we still have the presence of God, who is in charge and has an interest and rules in the affairs of men. We believe God will prosper our efforts and those of genuine officers and security agents who are working day-to-day to see that there's peace in Nigeria."

On August 8, according to the IMN, security forces fired on a procession during Ashura, in Zaria, Kaduna State, killing six Shia Muslims. The IMN said the security forces were acting under order of Kaduna State Governor Nasir El Rufai. Prominent Shia Muslim organizations such as Rassulah Aa'azam Foundation blamed the IMN for creating an image that all Shia are antigovernment separatists.

On August 17, according to media reports, two soldiers killed Yobe State imam Sheikh Goni Aisami after he offered them a ride, and they then attempted to steal his vehicle. The army arrested the soldiers, who were dishonorably discharged via court martial and transferred to a civilian court to be tried for murder. The case remained pending at year's end.

The government's proscription of the IMN as an illegal political organization remained in place, while other non-IMN Shia groups continued their activities without hindrance, according to the Rassulah Aa'azam Foundation, the largest Shia religious organization in the country. In January, IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his wife sued the government for "violating their fundamental human rights and infringing on their freedom to movement and own moving property" by its continued refusal to release their passports. During the year IMN members also staged protests calling for the return of Zakzaky's passport.

In May, authorities detained Roda Jatau, a Christian nurse in Bauchi State, for several months without charges, stating it was their intention to prevent her from being attacked after Jatau reportedly shared the WhatsApp message of student Deborah Samuel (also identified as Deborah Emmanuel or Deborah Yakubu) and a video of a Ghanaian imam condemning Samuel's killing that appeared to disparage religion. A mob had killed Samuel in Sokoto on May 12. Authorities later charged Jatau with insulting religion with intent to breach public peace and continued to detain her at year's end.

During the year, courts in northern states arrested and sentenced individuals for what they determined were immoral acts in line with respective state sharia penal codes. In October, hisbah agents in Jigawa reportedly arrested 31 persons, including 25 women, for immoral acts including prostitution and alcohol consumption.

In March, several Shia religious leaders, including Sheikh Salle Sani Zaria, secretary general of the Rasulul A'azam Foundation of Nigeria, again criticized IMN as a political group that was not representative of the majority of Shia Muslims in the country.

In December, IMN members commemorated the seventh anniversary of the 2015 clash between the army and the IMN in Zaria in which 348 IMN members and one soldier were killed. There was no reported progress in establishing accountability for the killings.

In September, the House of Representatives passed a bill for the establishment of a National Religious Harmony Commission whose mandate would include monitoring incidents of religious discrimination and hate speech and providing authorities with an early warning system to prevent religiously based violence and recommend remedial measures. At year's end, the legislation remained pending before the Senate.

The government continued its stated goal of promoting interfaith dialogue at the state and local level to address violence. In March, governors of all 36 states resolved to establish agencies on peace building and adopt a multilevel policing framework to respond to the high-level insecurity in the country. The Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency (created in 2016) inaugurated a project aimed at strengthening harmonious understanding between farmers and herders, who were often of different religious groups.

According to several local NGOs, various early warning systems operating throughout the North Central and North West regions prevented attacks. These systems capitalized on training local

individuals to sense rising communal tension and report it to authorities before it could grow to violence.

In February, Humanist Association of Nigeria President and former Muslim Mubarak Bala pled not guilty in his first court appearance over blasphemy charges since his arrest in 2020 in Kaduna State and transfer to Kano State. During his trial in April, Bala pled guilty in Kano State High Court to 18 counts of making statements that insulted religion with the intent “to cause a breach of public peace” – which carry sentences of up to two or three years in prison per charge under the state penal code – by posting statements on his Facebook page in 2020 that state officials in Kano called “inflammatory and disparaging” towards Islam. Although the presiding judge of the Kano State High Court had said during the sentencing that he would make the counts run concurrently, he sentenced Bala to 24 years in prison. Bala’s attorneys filed an appeal to reduce his sentence, and following his subsequent transfer to a prison in the Federal Capital Territory, he remained imprisoned at year’s end.

In August, the Federal Court of Appeal in Kano State rejected the appeal of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who was convicted of insulting the Prophet Muhammad under the state’s sharia penal code in 2020 and sentenced to death, and ordered him to be retried in Kano Sharia Court. Sharif-Aminu’s original blasphemy charge was based on an interpretation of the words of one of his songs that appeared to elevate the founder of his Tijaniyyah Sufi Brotherhood above the Prophet Muhammad. The decision upheld the Kano State High Court’s original ruling of January 2021 that both vacated the original conviction and ordered a retrial in Kano Sharia Court; Sharif-Aminu’s legal team had argued for acquittal and dismissal of the case. In its decision, the appeals court reaffirmed the judiciary’s longstanding jurisprudence that the constitution empowers states to make laws through their respective legislatures, thereby upholding the legality of Kano State’s sharia penal code – including its provisions for the death sentence for capital blasphemy. In November, Sharif-Aminu’s legal team submitted its brief to the Supreme Court challenging the appeals court’s finding on the constitutionality of the sharia penal code and specifically capital blasphemy. At year’s end, Sharif-Aminu’s conviction remained stayed pending the Supreme Court’s consideration of the case.

In December, the Kano State Upper Sharia Court convicted well-known Muslim cleric Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara on four counts of capital blasphemy and sentenced him to death. Kano State authorities detained Nasiru-Kabara and charged him with blasphemy in 2021 after he participated in a televised, three-hour debate in which he expressed his interpretations of the text of the hadiths (sayings or customs of Muhammad and his companions) that authorities said were heretical and insulted the Prophet Muhammad. His supporters expressed an intent to appeal the conviction.

At year’s end, Muslim cleric Abdul Inyass remained imprisoned pending an appeal of his death sentence following his blasphemy conviction in Kano Sharia Court in 2016.

There were reports that Hisbah Boards detained, abused, harassed, or intimidated individuals while enforcing their respective states’ sharia penal codes on gender and sexuality. In June in Bauchi State, a Hisbah Board worked with police to arrest three men, including a 70-year-old, for homosexuality; in July, a sharia court in Bauchi State sentenced them to death by stoning. According to press reports, the three men confessed but were not represented by counsel. Their sentence was stayed upon their submission of a notice of appeal to the Bauchi High Court.

In September, the news outlet *Channels Television* reported that a sharia court in Kano ordered the arrest of 10 local celebrities in response to a suit filed by local lawyers accusing them of singing and

dancing to “immoral” songs and posting them online. According to the report, the court ordered the police commissioner to arrest the 10 individuals and carry out an investigation on the roles they played in displaying immoral conduct. The report stated, however, that none of the individuals had been arrested or reported to the police, and there were no other reports indicating that the individuals had been arrested at year’s end.

The Kano State Films and Censors Board, a government organization responsible for regulating music and film, continued to require poets and singers to obtain a license to perform all new materials. In deciding on licenses, the board takes into account the views of Kano’s Ulama Council, an informal gathering of respected Muslim clerics representing each of Kano’s various Muslim groups, to which the state government often defers on matters that could affect public peace. In January, the board declared that a popular filmmaker, Aminu Mukhtar, was wanted after he failed to appear before the board for producing a film entitled *Makaranta*, which the board alleged promoted immorality. In May, unknown persons reportedly attacked the filmmaker, reportedly hitting him in the head with a hard object.

Jewish groups reported discrimination over their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays and the government’s lack of religious accommodation. They said this prevented members from taking state professional exams that are given only on Saturdays. They also said they were disenfranchised because all elections are held on Saturdays. They further noted state or local sanitation days, which closed streets on Saturday mornings, often preventing their members from attending Shabbat services.

In November, the MURIC called on the government to end the “oppression of Muslim students in Christian-owned private universities.” MURIC said that Muslim students at these universities were routinely not allowed to form faith-based student association groups, given no space for their prayers, not allowed to wear hijabs, and forced to attend church services on campus or face sanctions, up to and including suspension from the school.

Violence erupted on February 3 in Ijagbo, Kwara State, over the state-sponsored Baptist High School’s refusal to allow Muslim students to wear hijabs in school. Muslim youths clashed with CAN supporters at the school. Police eventually used tear gas to break up the crowd, but one Muslim youth was reportedly shot outside the school’s fence and approximately 50 Christians and Muslims were injured, some seriously. In a statement, the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria said the “prompt intervention of the Kwara state Government, security agents and the Muslim community of the state prevented the crisis from degenerating into a full blown religious upheaval.” On June 17, based on a similar 2019 case involving schools in Lagos State, the Supreme Court ruled the constitution allowed Muslim students to wear hijabs in all state-sponsored or affiliated schools.

While the CAMA law enacted in 2020 allowing the government to intervene in the management of private entities neither specifically addresses nor exempts nonprofit, nongovernmental, or religious organizations, nor contains language about religion, some NGOs and religious organizations continued to express concern about the law. The Senate held hearings in March to amend the law, although CAN said the proposed amendments were “repressive.” CAN had earlier stated concerns that included that the law might allow the government to exert administrative control over smaller religious organizations organized as NGOs. CAN sued the federal government over the law in 2021, and the Federal High Court heard the case on June 20, with a ruling pending by year’s end.

State-level actors, including government and traditional, religious, and civil society organizations regularly negotiated resolution of disputes. In July, the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency negotiated a peace deal between the mainly Christian Irigwe and the predominantly Muslim Fulani of Miango Chiefdom in Bassa Local Government Area, who had fought over each other's indigenous or settler status with respect to land use and ownership. The Plateau State governor witnessed the two groups sign an Expression of Commitment to Peace and Peaceful Coexistence.

In an August interview, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja Ignatius Kaigama cited the higher numbers of Muslims than Christians among federal government appointments as "subtle persecution" against Christians in the country, manifested by the distribution of resources and government positions.

President Buhari and Vice President Osinbajo regularly condemned attacks on places of worship and those attempting to exploit religious differences. In June, condemning the attack on St. Francis Catholic Church in Ondo State, President Buhari said, "Only fiends from the nether region could have conceived and carried out such dastardly act," adding that "eternal sorrow awaits them both on earth here, and ultimately in the hereafter." He added, "No matter what, this country shall never give in to evil and wicked people, and darkness will never overcome light. Nigeria will eventually win." Presidential candidate and former Vice President Abubakar Atiku tweeted and later deleted a condemnation of the mob killing of Deborah Samuel, the student in Sokoto accused of insulting religion. The government made several general statements throughout the year encouraging unity among rival groups throughout the country.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

The military remained engaged in more than a decade-long war against terrorist groups Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, both of which killed or kidnapped Muslims and Christians. In January, ISIS-WA declared Gudumbali, a town in Borno State, as its caliphate headquarters.

While, according to the Global Terrorism Index, terrorism decreased significantly in the country, terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, continued to attack population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques, and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East and elsewhere in the country, including in Kogi State and the Federal Capital Territory, according to observers. ISIS-WA continued to use improvised explosive devices, which resulted in dozens of military deaths. ISIS-WA efforts to implement shadow governance structures in large swaths of the region was reduced to the fringes of Lake Chad in the extreme North East, according to media reports. According to the Global Terrorism Index, ISIS-WA carried out its lowest number of attacks since 2020 but remained the deadliest terrorist group in the country. According to the Nigeria Security Tracker compiled by the Council on Foreign Relations, the number of incidents and deaths attributed to conflict in the North West declined significantly during the year.

According to International Crisis Group, ISIS-WA "has not shied away from cruelly punishing those it sees as contravening its interpretation of Sharia, amputating the hands of alleged thieves and killing adulterers, and on several occasions, it has massacred civilians suspected of supporting the government or in communities that refused to pay taxes or disobeyed orders. It has also been ruthless toward the Christian minority in north-eastern Nigeria, probably partly to demonstrate its loyalty to ISIS." The report also noted that ISIS-WA refrained from some abuses committed by Boko Haram, including kidnapping and forced marriages of girls and recruitment of boys.

In January, ISIS-WA attacked several villages within the Chibok Local Government Area of Borno State, killing four persons, abducting 24 others, and burning 110 buildings, including four churches. A further attack in the same area took place in February, when suspected ISIS-WA members killed three Christians and burned down a Church of the Brethren church building. At year's end, Leah Sharibu, captured by ISIS-WA in 2018, remained a captive, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity.

In September, Boko Haram terrorists killed four persons, including the chief imam of Gima village of Askira-Uba Local Government Area of Borno State just after early morning prayers. The attack left numerous individuals injured, and the terrorists also destroyed businesses and stole property.

On the eighth anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of 276 mostly Christian pupils from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in 2014, 96 remained in captivity, according to government and media reports; 11 Chibok girls were rescued in joint operations throughout the year. According to a March 1 article in the online newspaper *Christian Post*, communities in the Chibok area stated they had been attacked more than 72 times since the 2014 kidnappings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to government security services, NGOs, media, academic, and other observers, the level of insecurity driven by rising criminality continued to worsen during the year. Because issues of religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely, or even primarily, based on religious identity. Numerous fatal clashes continued to occur throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. There were also incidents of violence involving predominantly Muslim herders and Christian or Muslim farmers in the North West region. In addition, criminal groups continued to commit crimes of opportunity, including kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and banditry in the North West, North Central, and South East regions. According to media reports, the violent activity in these regions increased in volume, geographic scope, and severity during the year, a continuation of previous years' trends. Media reported on multiple attacks by "bandits" or armed criminal gangs on religious sites, including mosques and churches. Multiple academic and media sources said banditry and ideologically neutral criminality, rather than religious differences, were the primary drivers of violence in the North West region. Christian organizations, however, said clergy were often targeted as victims of these crimes, because they were viewed as soft targets who often traveled conspicuously without security in the evenings, were typically unarmed, had access to money, and generated significant media attention. While many religious groups, including the Catholic Church, formally refused to pay ransom, some communities raised money to ensure the return of their religious leaders. Family members of kidnap victims also sometimes paid ransom. According to data ACLED cited on its website, there were 3,953 civilian deaths from the violence during the year, compared with 3,699 in 2021, including an increase in violence against Christians, which comprised 5 percent of all violence. ACLED reported that a spike in attacks against Christians that began in previous years continued into the year but that overall, Christians were not the primary target of political violence in the country in terms of numbers of incidents.

In August, MURIC stated that 32,000 Muslims had been killed over the previous three years because of terrorist attacks in the north of the country. Noting a difference in burial culture between Christians and Muslims in which, "Christians display bodies of their victims and may even delay their burial for

days, if not months, while Muslims bury their victims almost immediately without any fuss,” MURIC accused Christian groups of “deceiv[ing] the world by claiming that it is Christians alone who are being killed in Nigeria.”

On June 5, during Pentecost Sunday services, attackers using explosives and firearms killed an estimated 50 persons, including women and children, at St. Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State in the South West region of the country. Media reported that one of the priests at the church, Father Andrew Abayomi, said the gunmen also bombed the church. Abayomi said, “We were about to round off service. I had even asked people to start leaving when we started hearing gunshots from different angles.” A church member, Kehinde Ogunkorode, said “about five gunmen stormed the church during service and shot members,” also noting that the shooting was indiscriminate. Government authorities later blamed ISIS-WA for the attack and made several arrests, but many residents called its response inadequate. ISIS-WA did not claim responsibility for the attack, which some sources said would be unusual if ISIS-WA were responsible. Jude Ayodeji Arogundade, the Catholic Bishop of Owo, in whose diocese the attack took place, strongly condemned the government, stating it was not pursuing those responsible.

In September, gunmen attacked and killed 15 persons during a Friday prayer service at a mosque in Ruwan Jema town, Bukkuyum Local Government Area, Zamfara State. Residents told media that the attackers “came on motorbikes while holding their guns and moved straight to the mosque and began to shoot sporadically at us.” According to one report, the town’s residents had provided a nine million naira (\$20,500) payment along with gasoline and cigarettes in August to ward off an armed attack.

On May 12, a mob killed Deborah Samuel following allegations she had disparaged religion in a comment she made on a student WhatsApp group. She reportedly said that the platform was for discussing schoolwork and not for what she termed “religious nonsense.” In response to threats against Samuel, a sophomore at the Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, school security staff members had moved her into a secured room to protect her, but a mob – reportedly made up of her fellow students and other young persons – overpowered security, seized and killed her, and set her body on fire. Witnesses circulated graphic images and video of the attack, and others widely shared reports about the incident and the impact on religious groups in Sokoto that critics termed fake news. In response to the incident, Sokoto State officials ordered the school’s immediate closure and instituted a curfew. Authorities deployed a heavy security presence at the school as boarding students evacuated their dormitories. Police confirmed the arrests of two student suspects, Bilyaminu Aliyu and Aminu Hukunci, and said officers were searching for other suspects whom they had identified in the video of the attack. On May 16, the Sokoto Magistrate Court arraigned Aliyu and Hukunci on murder charges. The investigation remained ongoing at year’s end. Prominent religious leaders condemned the killing, including Bishop Kukah and the Sultan of Sokoto, who called for justice and accountability. Following the killing of Samuel, other groups reportedly attacked two Catholic parishes in Sokoto.

International human rights organizations reported ongoing intimidation and threats against lawyers representing or considering representing individuals formally accused of intentionally insulting religion or blasphemy, which they stated created a repressive environment for human rights defenders and stymied access to justice.

In June, according to a BBC report, following an altercation with a Muslim cleric in Abuja that may have included a remark deemed to be blasphemous, a crowd of approximately 200 individuals attacked and burned to death Ahmad Usman.

On October 16, unknown gunmen attacked the Celestial Church of Christ in Lokoja, Kogi State; two persons were reportedly shot and killed, and several worshippers were injured. The investigation into the attack continued at year's end.

In June, according to a *Newsweek* report, three men reportedly beat and burned a sex worker alive after finding a Quran under her pillow during a search of the premises after she accused her customer of stealing. The men reportedly stated that she could not have a Quran and be a sex worker. The report stated that authorities charged the three men with murder and the case was under investigation. According to media, police identified the three men as Abubakar Musa, Sarauta Mosur, and Surajo Yusuf.

Numerous fatal intercommunal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. In January, herders reportedly killed 18 persons in Plateau State, most reportedly Baptists. The killings were followed by youth protesting what they characterized as the futility of previous interreligious dialogue at the paramount ruler's residence.

On September 17, militants raided the Cherubim and Seraphim church in Suleja in Niger State, North Central region, and abducted nearly 60 worshippers gathered for an all-night vigil. This followed a similar attack on September 13-14 at another Cherubim and Seraphim church in Kasuwan Magani, Kaduna State, in the North West region, in which at least 57 individuals were kidnapped, although as many as 14 soon escaped. According to the Christian website *Morningstar News*, herdsmen were suspected in both attacks.

There were numerous kidnappings for ransom involving members of clergy. One research organization reported that 145 Catholic clergy were attacked and 30 priests were kidnapped during the year, while a local media outlet noted that numerous Islamic clerics had suffered a similar fate. On November 7, media outlets reported that an unknown assailant abducted a Catholic priest, identified as Father Kunat, in Kaduna State. Other kidnappings reported include Father James Kantoma, a Catholic priest abducted in June in Plateau State, and Anglican Bishop of Jebba Oluwaseun Aderogba, along with his wife and driver, in Oyo State.

There were numerous attacks against schools in which armed groups kidnapped schoolchildren for ransom, which religious leaders stated impacted the broader activities of their religious communities. According to analysts, these kidnappings generally had financial motives.

In September, gunmen kidnapped dozens of worshippers attending Friday afternoon prayers at a mosque in Zugu town, Zamfara State. A resident who was at the mosque told *Reuters* that "the gunmen hid guns under their garments and pretended to be worshippers. On entering the mosque compound, they pulled out their weapons and fired in the air, forcing people to run for cover. The gunmen took dozens of worshippers and force-marched them to an unknown place."

In October, unknown gunmen kidnapped a Catholic priest, Father Joseph Igweagu, from his home after a vigil Mass at Umannachi in Anambra State.

In April, at a meeting of political and religious leaders in Abuja, the Sultan of Sokoto said, "The Northern people's blood is being spilt by these actions of either state or individuals, especially the bandits and terrorists. So, we need to always speak against violence, whether in Sokoto or in

Washington or Moscow. As religious leaders, if we don't do so, we will face questions from our Creator. We must always speak the truth."

Religious and other civil society leaders continued to promote interfaith activities throughout the year, including among Muslims, Christians, and minority belief communities. In November, the Humanist Association of Nigeria facilitated an interfaith dialogue with persons of faith.

On December 4, the Chabad Lubavitch movement officially opened its Ohel Penina facility in Abuja, which it called the "first synagogue in Nigeria." Local Jews noted the presence of other synagogues in the country, however.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy and consulate general representatives raised religious freedom issues with government officials throughout the year. Issues included the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases, the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and social trust, and societal abuses affecting religion. In June, the Secretary of State noted, "In Nigeria ... several state governments are using antidefamation and blasphemy laws to punish people for expressing their beliefs." Embassy and consulate general representatives met with officials including Vice President Osinbajo, Presidential Chief of Staff Gambari, cabinet secretaries – including Attorney General Abubakar Malami, Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama, Minister of Interior Rauf Aregbesola – and National Assembly members. U.S. officials also addressed religious tensions and efforts to bring religious groups together with several state governors – including the governors of Kaduna, Kano, Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, Kwara, Taraba, Borno, Plateau, Akwa Ibom, Enugu, and Abia States – and other government officials throughout the country. They discussed prevalent violence and insecurity in many areas of the country and government and government-supported grassroots efforts to reduce violence, combat insecurity, and promote religious freedom and religious tolerance.

Embassy, consulate general, and visiting Washington-based officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith relationship-building with a wide range of religious leaders and civil society organizations. In June and October, senior officials from the Department of State met with a broad array of religious leaders in Abuja, Kano, and Lagos. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials engaged with various religious groups, including CAN, JN1, the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna and others throughout the year. In June, the Ambassador met with the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abubakar III, the most senior Muslim leader in the country and head of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, and other prominent religious leaders at an interfaith dialogue. In August and September, embassy officials visited Muslim, International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and Jewish communities in Rivers, Imo, Anambra, and Enugu States to discuss the issues they faced as religious minorities in the South East region. Interfaith discussions sought to identify areas of consensus and narrow the gap between competing narratives regarding the main drivers of conflict in the country.

The embassy continued to fund peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna and Plateau. The programs trained leaders in farming and herding communities, including traditional, youth, religious, and female leaders, to build mechanisms to resolve tensions before they became violent conflicts, such as the development of early warning systems that could alert law enforcement and other authorities in advance of communal attacks. "Peace ambassadors" from embassy-funded

projects continued to work to bridge the gap between victims, traditional/religious leaders, and the security apparatus in Kaduna State.

The embassy addressed conflict among targeted at-risk communities by facilitating dialogues between aggrieved parties, promoting respect for religious freedom, and training community and religious leaders to peacefully resolve disputes. The embassy funded nine activities which sought to strengthen engagement and reduce tensions related to farmer-herders and other conflicts in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Benue, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Plateau, and Taraba States.

The embassy continued to fund interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states. The embassy concluded five small grants to faith-based and community organizations to support reconciliation in communities, primarily in the North Central region, experiencing ethno-religious violence.

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