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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Nigeria

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The federal government did not prevent detentions and restrictions affecting religious groups reportedly carried out by some state and local governments. The federal government was also ineffective in preventing or quelling religious-based violence, only occasionally investigated, prosecuted, or punished those responsible for abusing religious freedom, and sometimes responded to violence with heavy-handed tactics.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some Muslim and Christian religious leaders stated the terrorist organization known as Boko Haram sought to incite hostilities between Muslims and Christians in the northern and central states, where local laws, discriminatory employment practices, and fierce competition for land exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions. In areas where it was active, Boko Haram attempted to force non-Muslims to convert and targeted Muslims who did not follow its version of Islam or support its activities. Both Muslims and Christians experienced societal pressure if they changed their religious affiliation.

The U.S. embassy and consulate discussed and advocated for religious freedom and tolerance with government, religious, civil society, and traditional leaders. U.S. government officials discussed Boko Haram in high-level bilateral meetings. Visiting U.S. delegations, including the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, raised religious freedom with state and federal government officials. The embassy met with persons displaced by violence, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) expanded a project aimed at promoting tolerance in six northern states.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 174.5 million (July 2013 estimate). Most observers estimate 50 percent is Muslim, 40 percent is Christian, and 10 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. The predominant Islamic group is Sunni, divided between Sufi groups including Tijaniyah and Qadiriyyah. Growing Shia and Izala (Salafist) minorities exist. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, evangelicals and Pentecostals, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Groups that together comprise less than 5 percent of the population include Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups dominate the predominantly Muslim northern states. Significant numbers of Christians also reside in the north, and Christians and Muslims reside in about equal numbers in

central Nigeria, the Federal Capital Territory, and the southwestern states, where the Yoruba ethnic group predominates. While most Yorubas are either Christian or Muslim, some adhere to traditional Yoruba religious beliefs. 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 the majority, while an estimated 1 percent of the population is Muslim. Pentecostal groups are growing rapidly in the central and southern regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in the cities of Lagos and Abuja.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution mandates the government not adopt any religion as a state religion. The constitution prohibits state and local governments from adopting a state religion or giving preferential treatment to any religious or ethnic group.

A Katsina State law requires Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques to obtain permission from the state prior to operating. The law stipulates a punishment of one to five years of incarceration and/or a fine of up to \$3,000 for operating without a license.

The constitution provides for state courts based on common or customary law systems, which have operated in the region for centuries. The constitution specifically recognizes sharia courts for “civil proceedings” but is silent on the use of such courts for criminal cases. Sharia courts in 12 northern states also have authority to 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 and 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 agree to use sharia courts. Sharia courts cannot 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 Sharia Court of Appeal (the highest level of the sharia courts) theoretically can undergo appeal to the Federal Court of Appeal and then to the Supreme Court, although none has done so.

Despite constitutional language supporting only secular criminal courts and the prohibition against involuntary participation in sharia criminal courts, a Zamfara State law requires that a sharia court hear all criminal cases involving Muslims. Zamfara’s state-level religious affairs commission regulates religious affairs and preaching, distributes licenses to imams, and attempts to resolve religious disputes in the state. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, and Yobe also maintain state-level religious affairs ministries or bureaus, while many other state governors have appointed special advisers on religious affairs.

Christian and Muslim groups planning to build new churches or mosques must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission.

Both federal and state governments 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 say students are free to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs to provide alternative instruction.

Government Practices

There were reports of detentions by some state and local governments and lack of government protection for victims of religious violence. In addition, some state and local governments imposed restrictions on religious freedom that affected members of religious groups. Some state governments said they had placed limits on religious activity to address security and public safety concerns.

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. Some Christian groups said religious affairs ministries in some states focused on Muslims exclusively, and this amounted to adoption of a state religion.

There were no verified reports of sharia courts illegally hearing criminal cases during the year. On November 20, an upper sharia court in Bauchi State sentenced a man convicted of rape and incest to death by stoning. The defendant filed an appeal of the verdict with the Bauchi State Sharia Court of Appeal. No court date had been set by the end of the year. The defendant, who had been in police custody since the case began in 2011,

also filed a petition for bail with the Bauchi State High Court in November. Bail had not been set by the end of the year.

Sharia courts continued to hear civil cases as permitted by law.

State governments in Bauchi, Zamfara, Niger, Kaduna, Jigawa, Gombe, and Kano funded sharia law enforcement groups called the Hisbah, which enforced sharia law inconsistently and sporadically. The Kano State Hisbah increased its activity throughout the year, announcing the start of a campaign to “restore morality” in September. Members of the Kano State Hisbah occasionally detained women suspected of prostitution; one media outlet quoted a Hisbah official as stating 500 suspected prostitutes had been arrested between January and October. In October the Kano State Hisbah issued a statement to media outlets reminding men and women to remain separated when using public transportation and male taxi drivers not to wear short pants.

Kano State authorities levied steep fines and prison sentences for the public consumption and distribution of alcohol, in compliance with Sharia statutes. On November 27, the Kano State Hisbah publically destroyed 240,000 bottles of beer and 320,000 cigarettes it had seized in Kano city.

Authorities in some states reportedly denied building permits for construction of new places of worship for non-dominant religious communities, or for expansion and renovation of existing facilities. Christians reported local government officials in the predominantly Muslim northern states used zoning regulations and title registrations to stop or slow the establishment of new churches. On August 20, the Borno State Ministry of Lands and Survey notified land and property owners along Gubio Road, an area outside Maiduguri where many churches and Christian schools were located, that the state would imminently take possession of their land in order to build 1,000 housing units. The notification requested owners attend a meeting to discuss valuation of property and structures, but government officials did not conduct the assessments as planned. When questioned by a national Christian group, Borno State officials denied knowledge of the letter, and as of the end of the year the government had not demolished any structures. Some Christian groups said the project was an excuse to evict them.

Muslim organizations continued to criticize the Katsina State law requiring licensing of Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, although there were no reports of prosecutions. Opponents described the law as discriminatory because it did not impose licensing requirements on Christian groups and stated it inhibited the freedom of Muslim imams to preach openly against the government. The state government maintained that a more rigid definition of Islamic education and preaching helped address security concerns.

Some non-Muslims continued to say 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 courts system. One Muslim group complained that the inability to bring criminal cases before sharia courts curtailed its ability to fully exercise religious freedom.

The federal government approved the use of air carriers for religious pilgrimages to Mecca for Muslims and to Jerusalem or Rome for Christians, and subsidized both types of pilgrimages. It established airfares and negotiated bilateral air service agreements with Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Israel to support pilgrimages. The National Hajj Commission provided logistical arrangements for approximately 65,500 annual pilgrims to Mecca. The Nigerian Christian Pilgrims Commission provided logistical arrangements for the travel of as many as 30,000 pilgrims to Jerusalem and Rome.

Shortages of teachers capable of teaching Christianity or Islam reportedly existed in some public schools. Increasingly, students received no religious instruction in the classroom, turning instead to informal religious instruction outside of public schools or to parochial school education. One Muslim group based in the south confirmed no Muslim student had been required to participate in Christian religious education unless he or she attended a private Christian school.

Although there was no legal restriction against wearing the hijab, on February 5, a public school principal in Lagos State caned an 11-year-old girl when she did not remove her hijab after Islamic studies class, the only time during which the school permitted the hijab. In Lagos State some public school uniform regulations allowed students to wear hijabs only while actively praying. On May 27, the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria Lagos Area Unit filed a case in the Ikeja High Court, claiming the restriction was unconstitutional. The parties opted to settle out of court at the recommendation of the presiding judge in the case.

Christian groups reported individual administrators of government-run technical schools in several northern states had refused to issue or delayed the degrees and licenses of Christian students.

Government Inaction

The federal government did not act swiftly or effectively to prevent or quell communal or religious-based violence and only occasionally investigated and prosecuted perpetrators of that violence. The government also failed to protect victims of violent attacks targeted because of their religious beliefs or for other reasons. The

government did not adequately equip and train security forces to contain violent extremist groups in the north who attacked religious freedom.

Legal proceedings against five police officers charged in 2011 with the extrajudicial killing of Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf did not resume during the year. The court was not in session on continuation dates set in February, March, May, and June after the presiding judge transferred to a different jurisdiction in 2012. There were no indictments or prosecutions following three fatal attacks on high-profile Muslim leaders in late 2012.

Christian groups continued to assert local and state authorities did not deliver adequate protection or post-attack relief to rural communities in the northeast, where Boko Haram killed villagers and burned churches throughout the year.

Some Christian groups reported discrimination and a systematic lack of protection by state governments, especially in central Nigeria, where communal violence rooted in decades-long competition for land pitted majority-Christian farmers against majority-Muslim cattle herders. Federal, state, and local authorities did not effectively address underlying political, ethnic, and religious grievances leading to this violence.

Recommendations from numerous government-sponsored panels for resolving ongoing ethno-religious disputes in the Middle Belt included establishing truth and reconciliation committees, redistricting cities, engaging in community sensitization, and ending the dichotomy between indigenes and settlers. Nationwide practice distinguished between indigenes, whose ethnic group was native to a location, and settlers, who had ethnic roots in another part of the country. Indigenes and settlers often belonged to different religious groups. Local authorities granted indigenes certain privileges, including preferential access to political positions, government employment, and lower school fees, based on a certificate attesting to indigene status. The federal government did not implement any recommendations despite ongoing calls by political and religious leaders to do so.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, or People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad (commonly referred to as Boko Haram, Hausa for "Western education is forbidden"), continued to commit violent acts in its quest to overthrow the government and impose its own religious and political beliefs throughout the country, especially in the north. On November 13, the U.S. government designated Boko Haram as a foreign terrorist organization.

Boko Haram killed more than 1,000 persons during the year. The group targeted a wide array of civilians and sites, including Christian and Muslim religious leaders, churches, and mosques, using assault rifles, bombs, improvised explosive devices, suicide car bombs, and suicide vests. An attack on the Emir of Kano in January was widely believed to be an attempt by Boko Haram to silence the anti-extremist Muslim leader, although the group did not officially claim responsibility. On September 28, Boko Haram killed at least 50 mostly Muslim students at a technical college in rural Yobe State. After this and other incidents, security forces faced public criticism for arriving at the scene hours after the assailants had fled.

Boko Haram claimed responsibility for many of the scores of fatal attacks on churches and mosques, which often killed worshipers during religious services or immediately afterward. There were reports Boko Haram had burned down dozens of churches, often at night or during clashes with security forces. Christian groups stated the media underreported the razing of churches. Several Christian leaders reported church attendance rates in the north remained low after decreasing by 30 to 70 percent during 2012, attributing the decline to fear of 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 Borno and Yobe states. Survivors and relatives of victims said armed men had attempted to force them to renounce Christianity, killing those who did not convert on the spot. One Christian group reported suspected Boko Haram fighters had attacked a majority Christian town near Gwoza, Borno State on 11 separate occasions, attempting to force residents to convert or flee. There were also reports Boko Haram had targeted persons engaging in activities they perceived as un-Islamic. On January 18, gunmen reportedly killed 18 hunters selling non-halal meat at a market in Damboa, near the Borno State capital of Maiduguri. Also in January gunmen reportedly killed five men gambling by the side of the road in Kano State.

Civil society groups, media outlets, and politicians stated Boko Haram killed more Muslims than Christians because its primary bases of operation were in the predominately Muslim north and it frequently targeted schools, security forces, and government installations. In one such August incident, Boko Haram killed more than 20 soldiers and policemen in an attack on the Borno village of Mallam Fatori. Boko Haram also targeted Muslim civilians who aided the security forces; this was widely accepted as the motive of an attack on a mosque in Konduga, Borno State, which killed 44 worshippers on August 11.

Government attempts to stop Boko Haram were largely ineffective. Actions taken by security forces under the state of emergency, declared in May in the three northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, often increased the death toll, as bystanders were caught in crossfire during urban gunfights, security forces committed extrajudicial killings of suspected terrorists, and detainees died in custody. Religious leaders, civil society, and international human rights organizations condemned the government's heavy-handed military response. Some of the more than 10,000 refugees who fled to neighboring countries reported fear of both Boko Haram and the military had prevented their return. Although most residents reported improved security for part of the year in Maiduguri, where large clashes between Boko Haram and security personnel had occurred frequently, Boko Haram continued to operate freely in rural areas in the northeast and a large Boko Haram force mounted an attack on Maiduguri in December.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize social abuses or discrimination cases as either ethnic or religious intolerance.

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 marriages to Christians and to request Hisbah protection from reprisals by relatives. Similar procedures did not exist for those converting to Christianity. In July a woman living in northern Niger State who had converted to Islam requested local authorities protect her from her father, a Christian pastor who rejected her conversion and insisted she had been coerced, despite her public statements otherwise.

There was no progress in the investigation of the murder by unknown gunmen of family members of a woman who converted from Islam to Christianity in 2012.

In April a Christian leader in a northern state temporarily left the country after receiving threatening messages in response to his public support of religious tolerance and interfaith efforts. He suspected Christians in his area had made the threats and said other Christians and Muslims dedicated to strengthening interfaith ties often received hostile complaints from some members of their own religious communities.

Muslims and Christians continued to fear reprisal attacks based on their religious affiliation. Shortly after a suspected Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 22 people at a bus station in a Christian community in Kano city on March 18, there were unconfirmed reports of threats against the Hausa residents living in Abia State. Several Christian religious leaders publically called for calm, and no known violence occurred.

There were reports some Christians, along with many other residents, moved away from the conflict-ridden northeastern states of Borno and Yobe throughout the year. Several interviewees among approximately 100 internally displaced people who had moved to Jos in Plateau State said they left their homes out of fear of Boko Haram and such incidents as house-to-house killings, attacks on churches, and sustained violence between extremists and government security forces.

While the law prohibits religious discrimination in employment and other activities, religious groups continued to say some sectors discriminated in the work place because of religion. Muslim women in the south reportedly continued to face job discrimination in the private sector, especially in customer service jobs. Advocacy by Muslim groups resulted in three major banks in the south accepting the hijab (a veil covering the hair) in their corporate dress code for the first time.

The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), an independent organization comprised of 25 Christian and 25 Muslim leaders, advised the government on ways to mitigate violence between religious communities. The federal government publicly supported NIREC efforts, but the council met only once during the year. Several Christian and Muslim religious leaders expressed growing frustration with and distrust of NIREC leadership. Although many religious leaders publicly supported tolerance and interfaith methods of conflict resolution, some said growing distrust between Christian and Muslim leaders (and discord among denominations within the same faith tradition) threatened interfaith efforts.

Communities sometimes stigmatized those who did not accept the existence of God. For example, two Christians and one Muslim reported privately they no longer believed in God but continued to attend religious services out of fear their families would ostracize them and they would face extra scrutiny from their neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy staff promoted religious freedom and tolerance in discussions with government, religious, civil society, and traditional leaders. The Ambassador arranged and attended meetings with government officials for visiting delegations, including the State Department's Under Secretary for Political Affairs and Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. These officials encouraged officials at agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the National Security Advisor to address sectarian violence and called for timely legal action against perpetrators of violence. Over 10 other visiting U.S. government officials met with civil society groups and religious leaders, including the Christian Association of Nigeria and the National Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, to listen to and show public support for their concerns. In a meeting with President Jonathan, President Obama expressed U.S. support for Nigeria's efforts to defeat Boko Haram and emphasized the importance of a comprehensive approach that respects human rights to the success of those efforts, as did Secretary of State Kerry with Nigeria's foreign minister. Government officials responded with support for religious freedom and requests the United States assist Nigeria in combating Boko Haram.

In August the U.S. Consulate General in Lagos hosted an interfaith iftar to promote religious pluralism. Guest speakers focused on the fundamentally tolerant and peaceful nature of Islam and denounced religious violence. The principal officer at the U.S. Consulate General in Lagos discussed religious tolerance and interfaith relationship building on multiple occasions throughout the year with leaders of the growing Pentecostal Christian movement, other Christian leaders, and influential Muslim clerics. An embassy official noted a common commitment to religious tolerance and strong bonds between Nigerians of different faiths at an event in August, when 25 embassy volunteers served meals to needy youth and Muslims at an iftar.

USAID continued working with the Interfaith Mediation Center in Kaduna State on a program to help interfaith organizations deepen and strengthen community engagement capacities and support interfaith dialogue in six northern and central states.

U.S. embassy representatives supported interfaith dialogue by meeting with persons displaced by Boko Haram violence, speaking at a conference on communal violence hosted by the Plateau State government, and discussing religious tension mitigation efforts with religious, traditional, and academic leaders at several conferences and research presentations in Abuja.

The embassy and 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.