

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

NIGERIA

World Watch List 2024 position: 6

Key Findings: Christians suffer from a suffocating combination of *Islamic oppression, ethno-religious hostility, dictatorial paranoia* and *organized corruption and crime*. The previous government failed to prevent an increase in Islamic militant violence, much of which takes place in the north, in the form of attacks by Boko Haram and their now more powerful split ISWAP (Islamic State in West Africa Province), as well as by Fulani militants and different groups of armed bandits. The steady influx over recent years of Fulani militants from neighboring countries adds to the threat of violence. Such violence includes loss of life, physical injury, rape, abduction, loss of property and destruction of farmlands. Christians are especially affected and are being dispossessed of their land and means of livelihood. Many live as internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees.

Christians in northern Nigeria, especially in the states that follow strict interpretation of Sharia, face discrimination and exclusion as second-class citizens. Christians with a Muslim background also face rejection from their own families, pressure to give up Christianity, and often physical violence. In recent years, violence has increased and spilled into southern states, which heightens the sense of insecurity and the level of impunity. Former President Buhari positioned Muslims in the most important government roles, which has made it harder for Christians who have suffered human rights violations to speak out. Attacked Christian communities are often abandoned by the security forces, which are under federal command. Religiously-motivated violence is taking place against a backdrop of climate change and environmental degradation, pushing the Fulani herdsman and their cattle southwards and putting stress on herder-farmer relationships.

Quick Facts: Nigeria

Leader	President Bola Tinubu
Population	222,182,000
Christians	102,988,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Islam (46,6% of the population) and Christianity (46,4%)
Government	Federal Presidential Republic

Context: Nigeria's democratic transition did not occur until 1999, when 16 years of military rule ended. Buhari, from All Progressives Congress (APC), was president from 2015-2023. After coming to power May 2023, President Tinubu replaced security chiefs (and other services) in a [major reshuffle](#), establishing a better balance between Muslim and Christian critical office holders (Al-Jazeera, 20 June 2023). He also gave more influence to Muslims from the south west, where he is from, at the expense of Muslims from the north. According to The Insight on 13 June 2023, President Tinubu has said that one of his [priorities](#) will be to take decisive action against perpetrators of violence in the country.

Ethnicity and religion play a significant role in Nigerian politics. Politicians try to mobilize support directly and indirectly by appealing to ethnic and religious sentiments. Historically, the Muslim Hausa-Fulani politicians have dominated the political field, especially due to their dominance in the army, which has always been a significant player in Nigerian politics. The major bone of contention in Nigerian politics is the distribution of revenue derived from the country's considerable oil resources. Corruption is rampant, both at state and federal level.

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian (71% Christian), while northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim (26% Christian). The religious divide partly coincides with the ethnic divide. The Hausa-Fulani in the north are predominantly Muslim, the Igbo in the south east are mainly Christian, while the Yoruba in the south west have both a significant Muslim and Christian population.

Though according to its Constitution Nigeria is a secular state, for decades the northern ruling elite has discriminated against Christians in favor of Muslims. Since 1999, Sharia law has been established in 12 northern states.

In the north, Boko Haram targets Christians, abducting and killing males and abducting, raping and forcibly marrying females as part of the mission to depopulate Christian-dominated territories. Similar violence is carried out by ISWAP, who also pledge allegiance to Islamic State. Fulani militants attack predominantly Christian villages in several northern states, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying churches and other buildings as well as harvests or occupying farmlands. The steady influx over recent years of Fulani militants and Shuwa Arabs from neighboring countries adds to the threat of violence. Different groups of armed bandits are also responsible for violence where they rape, kill, kidnap and burn property. . The relationships between these different groups of insurgents are complex, but all contribute to a 'culture of violence' that makes Christians particularly vulnerable, mainly in northern states but also in several southern states.

At the end of 2022, Nigeria accounted for [3.6 million internally displaced people](#) (IDPs) due to the violence, many of whom are Christians.

All this violence not only spreads fear and creates extreme levels of vulnerability for Christians (and other Nigerians), it also severely traumatizes people in a country where trauma counseling services are extremely scarce in relation to the need. Additionally, abducting people has become an industry, which is operating in a highly professional way. It leads to severe indebtedment of families when one of their members has been abducted and must be ransomed. It also leads to serious impoverishment of Christians parishes or congregations when priests or pastors are abducted and must be ransomed for huge sums of money.

How the situation varies by region: The situation has become very problematic for all civilians, particularly Christians. Nigeria has six geopolitical zones. Each zone had its own profile of hostilities against Christians (and others). Violence in the north east was mainly perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISWAP. In the north west there were armed bandits. In the north central, including Kaduna State, there were Fulani militants. Violence is no longer limited to the three northern geopolitical zones, but has already extended into the three southern geopolitical zones. Meanwhile, the circles of influence of these different groups have been increasingly overlapping, and it has become difficult to distinguish which violent group is responsible for which acts and what the specific identity of a certain group is.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not scored separately in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Historical Christian communities:** In Nigeria these include the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations such as Anglicans, Methodists and Lutherans. These churches face violent attacks against their life and property perpetrated by the different Islamic militant groups and armed bandits and discrimination from the local authorities, especially in the northern states. Violence has also extended into the southern states, as has land grabbing and community intimidation by Fulani militants.

- **Converts to Christianity:** These are mostly converts from Islam. Muslim converts to Christianity from northern Nigeria often have to flee their homes and states to escape being killed or harassed. They are often forced to find refuge in "safe houses". This is less likely to occur in the south, although it happens to a limited degree in south-western areas.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** The Evangelical and Pentecostal communities now make up a considerable proportion of the Nigerian Church. In the northern states, Evangelical and Pentecostal communities face discrimination from the local authorities, as well as violent attacks against their life and property by the different Islamic militant groups and armed bandits. Violence against them has also extended into the southern states.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression ethno-religious hostility, dictatorial paranoia and organized corruption and crime:** There is considerable overlap between the sources of religious freedom violations in Nigeria. 12 northern states are governed by Sharia law. Former President Buhari appointed Muslims to key positions in the security apparatus and important economic sectors. Although his successor, President Tinubu, established a better balance between Muslim and Christian critical officeholders, the impact of this reshuffle still needs to be seen. This fosters in the whole country a culture of impunity where the fundamental rights of non-Muslims are not upheld and where violations against Christians are not addressed. Non-Christian (especially Muslim) religious leaders have encouraged violations against Christians through intolerant ideology and incitement to violence. Islamic Radical groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to target civilians, especially Christians. The same applies to violence committed by Fulani militants. Added to this, there is violence committed by different groups of armed bandits. This happens in the northern states and increasingly also in the southern states. Other perpetrators include citizen mobs committing street violence against Christians, family members (especially in the context of conversion from Islam to Christianity), political parties and organized crime networks.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Raids by Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed bandits have terrorized Christian communities. Women and girls are abducted raped, sexually enslaved, kidnapped for ransom and killed by militants. In addition to being "married," girls abducted by militants have reportedly been used as human shields or leverage in negotiation. Sexually assaulted women not only carry their own trauma; their husbands sometimes find it difficult and may view their wife as tarnished, which can cause further stigma and shame. Women are additionally vulnerable to sexual violence in IDP camps.

Female typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Enforced religious dress code; Forced marriage; Forced to flee town/country; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Targeted Seduction; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual; Violence – verbal.

- **Men:** In the North of Nigeria, and increasingly in the South, Christian men and boys are often targeted and killed by actors including Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed "bandits". This eliminates the current generation of males, but also guarantees that the birthrate of Christian families will fall. Survivors and young boys risk forced inclusion in militant ranks. Christian men have also been strategically marginalized in terms of employment and education. If a man is killed, loses his job or has his property seized, his dependent family can become impoverished.

Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Imprisonment by government; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological.

Short description of the change in score and why: Both pressure and violence scores (the latter at the maximum level possible) have remained largely unchanged in the WWL 2024 reporting period. Christians and their communities continue to be attacked in many parts of the country. Although 2023 saw the installation of a new president, with Bola Ahmed Tinubu replacing Muhammadu Buhari, it is unclear what this might mean for Christians in Nigeria. Despite both Buhari and Tinubu being Muslim – breaking an informal agreement that presidency should switch between a Christian and a Muslim – the new president has carried out a major reshuffle which provides a better representative balance of the two faiths than was in place under Buhari. This might cause a positive shift towards acknowledging the extent of the human rights violations being perpetrated against Christians, and lead to more effective intervention by security forces to protect Christians. However, proof of this has yet to be provided.

- **Private Life:** Converts to Christianity from Islam in northern Nigeria (including parts of the south) often have to flee to escape being harassed or killed by their family and the community. Anything that reveals their Christian faith is risky. For non-convert Christians, their name can identify their faith. A person's name can mean life or death during raids by Islamic militant groups. Living in a (mainly) Christian community in the rural areas of many states is also very risky and leads to high levels of fear. The same applies to many Christians living as IDPs in an unsafe environment.
- **Family Life:** Christians face serious challenges in family life, especially in the northern states (including parts of the south). Converts from Islam fear discovery of their new faith by their families, which could mean loss of child custody or needing to flee their home. When Christian women are widowed, Muslim relatives sometimes take the children to raise them as Muslims. It is difficult for Christian parents to raise their children in accordance with their faith in IDP camps.
- **Community Life:** In northern Nigeria (including parts of the south), people with an English or biblical name often face discrimination in schools, hospitals and in the workplace. In Muslim-dominated areas, Christians are seen as infidels and harassed. Men may even be detained for having an "immoral hair cut". Ruling emirs are sometimes complicit in the abductions of Christian girls for forced marriage. Government amenities do not reach Christian communities as much as they ought. In some rural areas, Christians have been denied water and have had to walk for hours to get it. Even in cities, the Christian quarters are sometimes denied amenities such as sanitation services. More is invested in the infrastructure of Muslim-majority areas than in Christian-majority areas. Among IDPs, Christians are often left out of the distribution of relief.
- **National Life:** Easy accusations of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion are forcing Christians to be very careful in discussions with Muslims, as their words can easily be used against them. Christians have been killed on the spot when they were accused of speaking ill of Muhammad or Islam. In general, there is a climate of impunity; those who attack Christians and their properties are hardly ever arrested. However, Christians have served prison sentences for crimes for which a Muslim is easily discharged or not charged at all. At times, Christians are charged in Sharia courts, which have no jurisdiction over them. Their evidence is worth half that of a Muslim. Although the Constitution recognizes the right to freedom of religion or belief, Sharia law (adopted in 12 northern states) supersedes this. The media often reports attacks on Christian communities as "communal clashes". Muslim-owned media outfits can under-report or distort attacks against Christians by Muslims.
- **Church Life:** In northern Nigeria, churches are destroyed and church leaders (sometimes with their families) are abducted or executed. The same happens to many other Christians. Church activities are monitored, obstructed or hindered. Christians are also denied land for building churches. Openly integrating Muslim converts could provoke violence against the church and its property, so many converts move to safe locations elsewhere in Nigeria. Insecurity has spread to southern Nigeria too. In an atmosphere of chaos and impunity, speaking out against the human rights violations of Christians and other Nigerians is risky.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: Adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) are known to face attacks and abductions. According to a report published by the Observatory on Religious Freedom in Africa in February 2023, the number attacked and killed in 2019-2022 was 40, and the number abducted was 133 ([ORFA, Killings and Abductions in Nigeria 2019-2022](#), Appendix 1C, p.29 and Appendix 3C, p.35).

Muslims who are not part of a militant group attacking communities are also vulnerable to attack. Especially in north-western and north-central states, many Muslims have been killed and/or abducted by the same groups that killed and/or abducted Christians, and also had to flee their villages. (See ORFA report mentioned above.) [Shiites are banned](#) in Nigeria.