

NIGERIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states. General insecurity throughout the country's regions increased during the year: a terrorist insurgency in the North East; brazen kidnapping and armed robbery rings in the North West and southern regions; militant groups and criminal gangs in the South South region; and conflict between farmers and herders over access to land in the North Central region. There were incidents of violence involving predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and settled farmers, predominantly Christian but also Muslim, in the North Central and North West regions. The government continued ongoing security operations and launched additional operations that it stated were meant to stem insecurity created by armed criminal gangs and violent conflict over land and water resources that frequently involved rival ethnic groups. Various sources said the government did not take significant measures to combat insecurity throughout the country; the International Crisis Group said that state governments relied heavily on armed vigilante groups to help quell the violence, which it said was counterproductive. Some said this lack of government response exacerbated insecurity and failed to address underlying causes. A report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) stated the presence of state forces was "too inconsistent and limited to protect or support communities, or mitigate and suppress violence." The government continued its detention of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, head of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a Shia organization, and his wife despite a December 2016 court ruling that they be released by January 2017. All the other members of IMN arrested during the 2015 clash with the military were released by February. On September 29, the Kaduna State High Court rejected a motion filed by El-Zakzaky and his wife to dismiss the case. The court adjourned the case to November and later to January 2021. During the year authorities arrested and detained two individuals under blasphemy laws: Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, sentenced to death for blasphemy on August 10, and 16-year-old Umar Farouq, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment. Authorities detained Mubarak Bala, head of the

Humanist Association of Nigeria, in April without filing any charges, although his attorneys stated they believed he was being held on charges related to allegations of insulting Islam on Facebook. The government at both the federal and state levels put temporary limitations on public gatherings, including religious services, in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Most churches and mosques throughout the country closed in April and May, during which time state governments arrested both Christian and Muslim leaders for violating lockdown orders. Beginning in June, the government's easing of lockdown restrictions included reopening religious houses of worship with prevention measures in place.

Terrorist groups including Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) attacked population centers and religious targets and maintained a growing ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. The groups continued to carry out a range of attacks targeting the local civilian population, including churches and mosques.

Violent conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in the North Central states continued throughout the year. Some religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to express concern that this conflict had religious undertones. In addition to religious differences, local authorities, scholars, and regional experts pointed to ethnicity, politics, criminality, lack of accountability and access to justice, and increasing competition over dwindling land resources as among the key drivers of the violence. Attacks and killings attributed to Muslim Fulani herdsmen continued during the year. According to ACLED data, total civilian deaths numbered 2,454 during the year, compared with 2,198 in 2019 and 3,106 in 2018. Some domestic and international Christian groups stated that Muslim Fulani herdsmen were targeting Christian farmers because of their religion. Local Muslim and herder organizations said unaffiliated Fulani were the targets of Christian revenge killings. Local and international NGOs and religious organizations criticized what they said was the government's inability or unwillingness to prevent or mitigate violence between Christian and Muslim communities. Christian organizations reported several cases during the year of Muslim men kidnapping young Christian girls and forcing them into marriage and conversion to Islam.

The U.S. embassy, consulate general, and visiting U.S. government officials voiced concern over abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion and religious tensions in the country in discussions throughout the year with government officials, including the Vice President, cabinet secretaries, and

National Assembly members. Embassy and consulate general officials further strengthened their engagement on religious freedom issues with a wide range of religious leaders and civil society organizations, emphasizing the importance of interfaith relationships. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials engaged with various religious groups throughout the year and delivered remarks on the importance of the respect for religious freedom at large religious gatherings. To mark Religious Freedom Day on January 16, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable with religious leaders to discuss issues of peace and security and to promote religious freedom. In July, the embassy held a roundtable with prominent religious leaders from different churches and dioceses in the country and discussed the violence occurring in the country, providing an overview of challenges and opportunities for affected communities. Interfaith discussions sought to identify areas of consensus and narrow the gap between competing narratives over the drivers of conflict in the country. Embassy officials and the Counselor of the Department of State met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and security during his visit in October.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nigeria a “Country of Particular Concern” for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom and announced a waiver of sanctions that accompany designation in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 214 million (midyear 2020 estimate). While there are no official indicators of religious affiliation in the country, the Pew Global Religious Futures report estimates it is roughly evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, while approximately 2 percent belong to other or no religious groups. Many individuals syncretize indigenous animism with Islam or Christianity.

A 2010 Pew report found 38 percent of the Muslim population self-identifies as Sunni, the vast majority of whom belong to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, although a sizable minority follows the Shafi’i school of *fiqh*. The same study found 12 percent of Muslims in the country self-identify as Shia, with the remainder declining to answer or identifying as “something else” (5 percent) or “just a Muslim” (42 percent). Included among the Sunnis are several Sufi brotherhoods including Tijaniyyah, Qadiriyyah, and Mouride. There are also Izala (Salafist) minorities and small numbers of Ahmadi and Kalo Kato (Quraniyoon)

Muslims. A 2011 Pew report found roughly one quarter of Christians are Roman Catholic and three quarters Protestant, with small numbers of Orthodox or other Christian denominations. Among Protestant groups, the Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian Churches maintain the largest populations, while evangelicals, Pentecostals, Anabaptists (Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, New Apostolics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses report tens of thousands of adherents each. Other communities include Baha'is, Jews (both internationally recognized and unrecognized, as well as significant numbers of other Judaic-oriented groups), Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, animists, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim North West and North East regions. Significant numbers of Christians, including some Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri, also reside in the North East and North West. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North Central and South West regions, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic group – whose members include both Muslims and Christians – predominates. In the South East and South South region, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the Niger Delta region, where ethnic groups include Ijaw, Igbo, Ogoni, Efik, Ibibio, and Urobo, among others, Christians form a substantial majority; a small but growing minority of the population is Muslim. 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 states of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Kano.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates neither the federal nor the 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 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; such courts do not have the authority to compel participation by non-Muslims or Muslims. At least one state, Zamfara, requires sharia courts to hear noncriminal cases in which all litigants are Muslim and provides the option to appeal any decision to the common law court. Non-Muslims have the option to have their cases tried in civil 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. Despite constitutional language supporting only secular criminal courts and the prohibition against involuntary participation in sharia criminal courts, a Zamfara State law requires a sharia court hear all criminal cases involving Muslims in that state. 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. Defendants have the right to challenge the constitutionality of sharia criminal statutes through common law appellate courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who, while not required to have any formal training in the sharia penal code, may seek advice from sharia experts. Included in the sharia laws are blasphemy laws which can carry sentences up to and including the death penalty, though the secular court system has historically vacated such sentences on appeal.

In the states of Kano and Zamfara, state-sanctioned Hisbah Boards regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching, license imams, and attempt to resolve religious disputes between Muslims in those states. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs ministries or

bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

On August 7, President Muhammadu Buhari signed into law the Companies and Allied Matters Act of 2020 (CAMA), which streamlines procedures for and increases the ease of doing business in the country by outlining management responsibilities of businesses and organizations. The law contains provisions that, according to some legal scholars, could place some smaller religious organizations under the administrative control of the government.

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction 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. State officials and many religious leaders stated that students have the right to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs to provide an alternative to any instruction offered in a religion other than their own. The constitution also states that no religious community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place that community wholly maintains.

Several states have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools of registered religious groups. 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 (\$1,300), or both for operating without a license.

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

Government Practices

Numerous fatal intercommunal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim Fulani herders. The government undertook 20 targeted military operations whose aim it stated was to root out bandits and armed gangs in the region and to arrest perpetrators of communal and criminal violence, but multiple sources stated that the government measures were largely reactive and insufficient to address the violence.

According to multiple academic and media sources, banditry and ideologically neutral criminality was the primary driver of violence in the North West region, although religious figures and houses of worship were often victims. The government launched additional security operations in the North West region that it stated were meant to stem insecurity created by armed criminal gangs and violent conflict over land and water resources, which frequently involved predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and settled farmers, who were both Muslim and Christian.

Various sources stated the government did not take significant measures to combat insecurity, including ethnoreligious violence, throughout the country. The NGO International Crisis Group said in a report released during the year, “A further factor that has exacerbated violence in the North West is the state authorities’ negligence in dealing with the crisis.” The report said that many state governments relied primarily on arming vigilante groups to counter the violence, which it said was counterproductive. An ACLED report stated, “Responding to communal violence is not a priority of Nigeria’s state forces. A lack of government engagement leads to an increased reliance on local vigilante groups, and in turn, an increased accessibility to arms. Despite increasing their activity substantially since 2015, the overall presence of state forces is too inconsistent and limited to protect or support communities or mitigate and suppress violence.”

In a speech given at the funeral of Michael Nnadi, a Catholic seminary student killed by gang members in Kaduna State on January 31, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Matthew Kukah commented on the situation in the northern part of the country, saying the government and what he called “the northern Muslim elite” was largely to blame for violence and poverty, especially affecting Christians. In his address he said, “We are being told that this situation has nothing to do with religion. Really? It is what happens when politicians use religion to extend the frontiers of their ambition and power...By denying Christians lands for places of worship across most of the northern states, ignoring the systematic destruction of churches all these years, denying Christians adequate recruitment, representation and promotions in the State civil services, denying their indigenous children scholarships, marrying Christian women or converting Christians while threatening Muslim women and prospective converts with death, they make building a harmonious community impossible.”

On March 19, Sultan of Sokoto Sa’ad Abubakar III stated at a Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC) meeting, “We have been reading and hearing reports about the persecution of Christians in Nigeria and I keep asking myself how? Christians are being killed, Muslims are also being killed and they are all

lives created by God. For me, there is no persecution of anybody in this country. If you claim there is a persecution of Christians in Nigeria, there would also be claims of persecution of Muslims, but that would not solve the problem. People claim they are denied places to build mosques, churches in some parts of the country. But the right thing to do in such cases is to approach relevant authorities and not to make claims of persecution. I can quote from now till the next 100 years of things that have been done or not done to Muslims, but we usually approach relevant authorities in ways that we believe would bring solutions to the problems.”

Some religious freedom activists said the Buhari administration was sympathetic to foreign Fulanis and that many state governors made it easy for foreign Fulanis to receive documents referring to one’s ancestral home that could facilitate access to government services or certain privileges, which compounded resource disputes and sectarian conflict. Some civil society representatives protested President Buhari’s appointment of primarily Muslim northerners to high-level positions. They said there was a culture of impunity in the country and a lack of accountability for those who commit mass civilian killings.

In June, the UK Parliament’s All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief released a report, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, in which the group stated, “Another of the main drivers of the escalating violence is the Nigerian Government’s inability to provide security or justice to farmer or herder communities.” The report stated the parliamentary group agreed with Amnesty International’s conclusion that “failure to protect communities, as well as cases of direct military harassment or violence, combined with an unwillingness to instigate legitimate investigations into allegations of wrongdoing, ‘demonstrate, at least, willful negligence; at worst, complicity’ on the behalf of some in the Nigerian security forces.” The government responded in August by welcoming the report as well as “inputs that would help any peaceful coexistence of Nigerian citizens,” although it said it was “incorrect to assert that the government was doing nothing to address the intertwined threats” of farmer-herder clashes and Boko Haram terrorists. It also urged the authors of the report “to visit Nigeria, whether formally or informally, to discuss the points raised” in it.

According to media reports, Operation Sahel Sanity, one of multiple government paramilitary operations in the north, destroyed 197 of what it termed bandit hideouts, killed 220 bandits, arrested 892 suspects, and rescued 642 kidnap victims in the North West region during the second half of the year. Despite this, the reports said that government was unable to keep pace with the growing number

and frequency of attacks, saying this was mostly because the security forces in the country were too few and spread too thin and bogged down in the northeast fighting Boko Haram and ISIS-WA. In November, President Buhari asked his chief of staff, Ibrahim Gambari, to engage with political, traditional, and religious leaders throughout the areas of the country that had seen outbreaks of violence to combat insecurity and engage with the country's significant youth population. Following the National Governors' Forum meeting on November 5, the 36 state executives committed to guidelines to engage with religious, traditional, and civil society leaders to "drive a common agenda and generate...support for security personnel who ensure the safety and wellbeing of all Nigerians."

The government's proscription of the IMN remained in place throughout the year, following a Federal High Court ruling in 2019 and the government's subsequent banning of the IMN as an illegal organization. The government continued to emphasize that the IMN's proscription "has nothing to do with banning the larger numbers of peaceful and law-abiding Shiites in the country from practicing their religion."

Shia Rights Watch reported on January 23 that government forces used tear gas and firearms against protesters calling for the release of IMN head Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, and authorities killed one protester and severely injured another.

Shia Rights Watch reported in June that the Federal High Court in Abuja awarded five million naira (\$13,000) each for wrongful death to the families of three IMN members whom the police allegedly killed in July 2019. The judge also ordered the National Hospital to release the bodies of the three men. The body of a fourth individual, whom police also allegedly killed the same day, was not released but was kept in a different hospital.

An IMN spokesperson said police killed three IMN members during the group's annual Ashura procession in Kaduna on August 24 and a further two died in clashes with police on August 30.

On August 24, an IMN spokesperson confirmed that all IMN members arrested in the 2015 Zaria clashes with the army except Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his wife had been released by February, despite a December 2016 court ruling that El-Zakzaky and his wife be released by January 2017. Local and international NGOs continued to criticize the lack of accountability for soldiers implicated in a December 2015 clash between the army and IMN members that, according to a Kaduna State government report, left at least 348 IMN members and one soldier

dead, with IMN members buried in a mass grave. The Kaduna State High Court rejected El-Zakzaky's motion to dismiss his and his wife's case on September 29. On October 19, IMN members protested El-Zakzaky's continued detention on the fifth anniversary of the violent clash with police in Zaria. On November 28, the High Court adjourned the case of El-Zakzaky and his wife to January 2021.

Blasphemy laws were part of the expanded sharia laws introduced between 1999 and 2000 in 12 Muslim majority states in the northern part of the country. Although in past years blasphemy laws were rarely, if ever, implemented, authorities arrested two individuals for blasphemy during the year. In September, a Kano State sharia court convicted and sentenced 16-year-old Farouq Omar, who had no legal representation at the time, to 10 years in prison and menial labor for committing blasphemy during an argument with a friend; after his case was reported in the press, Omar gained volunteer legal representation and his lawyers appealed the ruling. Various human rights groups and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) condemned the judgment and called for its reversal. The same Kano State sharia court in August convicted and sentenced 22-year-old Yahaya Aminu-Sharif to death for blasphemy after he allegedly elevated a Tijaniyyah saint above the Prophet Mohammed in lyrics for a song he had written. Aminu-Sharif's lawyers appealed the court's decision. On April 28, authorities arrested Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, without charge. His attorneys said they believed it was related to Bala's alleged insulting of Islam on social media. Bala was detained in a Kano prison without formal charges but was granted access to his lawyer in October. On December 21, the High Court ordered the police and other federal authorities to release Bala; however, because he was in Kano State custody, he remained in detention at year's end.

Criminal groups committed crimes of opportunity, including kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and banditry in North West and South East regions. According to security experts, this criminal activity increased in volume, geographic scope, and attendant violence during the year. Clergy were often targeted as victims of these crimes, according to Christian organizations, because they are viewed as soft targets who often travel conspicuously without security in the evenings, are typically unarmed, have access to money, and generate significant media attention. While many churches, 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. Federal and state governments responded to increased criminality in the region with new security initiatives. The Nigerian Police Force

increased the number of police checkpoints on major road networks. State governors across the regions ran local “community policing” operations to combat kidnappings, primarily through state-supported vigilante groups such as neighborhood watch groups, the Enugu Forest Guard, and the Abia State and Anambra State Vigilante Services. Media reports often said Fulani herdsmen were responsible for these attacks, particularly those in the South West region, but, according to analysts, most incidents were perpetrated by local armed criminal groups.

According to Muslim leaders in Nasarawa State and Benue State governor Samuel Ortom, there were groups of foreign Sahelian nomadic Mbororo pastoralists present in the country since 2017 who were often mistaken for indigenous Nigerian Fulani herdsmen. Christian leaders throughout the country criticized what they stated was a formal role that state governments played in welcoming the influx of these foreigners in a situation of increased levels of poverty and reduced job opportunities for permanent residents. Yoruba sociocultural groups, community leaders, and politicians in Oyo, Osun, and Ekiti States increasingly employed what sources stated was incendiary speech against the Mbororo, blaming them for a rise in crime and accusing the “invading herdsman” of looking to “Fulanize the south.”

The government at both the federal and state levels put temporary limitations on public gatherings, including religious services, in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Most churches and mosques throughout the country closed, but state governments arrested both Christian and Muslim leaders for violating lockdown orders. In March, both Christian and Muslim communities quickly complied when the government imposed quarantine measures; religious leaders said they underscored the necessity of staying home during Holy Week, including Easter, and the run-up to Ramadan. In Kaduna State, authorities arrested and arraigned two Christians on criminal disobedience charges on March 27 for attempting to hold church services, while three Muslims were charged with similar offenses on March 30 for holding congregational services in a mosque. Abuja officials arrested a prominent imam for violating stay-at-home orders but refrained from arresting a pastor who was preaching alone on camera at the Christ Embassy Church to worshipers online on Easter Sunday, April 12. In predominantly Christian Delta State, authorities arrested three pastors on Easter Sunday for violating lockdown orders issued the previous day. In Benue State, security personnel forcefully dispersed church services in remote areas where clergy disobeyed lockdown orders, although churches within city centers complied with the lockdown.

On July 8, police in Ohafia, Abia State, arrested Ifekwe Udo, the founder of the Assemblies of Light Bearer Greater Church of Lucifer, popularly known as the Church of Satan, for violating coronavirus pandemic lockdown directives. The following day, Christian youths stormed the church and demolished it. The town banished Udo in August after authorities released him from detention. At year's end, he remained in exile in neighboring Imo State.

Beginning in June, the government's easing of lockdown restrictions included reopening religious houses of worship that had pandemic prevention measures in place. In September, federal mandates limited public gatherings to no more than 50 persons in enclosed spaces. State-level mandates varied on the reopening of religious services as the pandemic progressed. In September, the Delta State government urged churches to hold multiple services to reduce the numbers of congregants at any one time in their buildings in compliance with modified coronavirus pandemic protocols. Due to the pandemic and Saudi Arabia's closure of the Muslim holy places to international Hajj pilgrims, in August the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria announced that 90 percent of intending pilgrims declined a refund of their Hajj fare in lieu of a prepayment for the following year's pilgrimage. The government similarly curtailed its sponsorship of Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem in response to the pandemic.

On August 20, Jigawa State Hisbah authorities announced they had destroyed approximately 600 confiscated bottles of beer in Tundun Babaye village. In October, the Kano State government called for the arrest and prosecution of officials of the Nigerian Breweries company for arranging for the secret importation of beer, which is banned in the state on religious grounds.

Members of both Christian and Muslim groups continued to report some state and federal government laws discriminated against them. In August, the Anglican Church spoke against a newly enacted Anambra State law on burials that dictated the type, manner, and time of the religious service or rites and how they would be performed. The law was passed without the Church's input, which it said violated the country's constitution.

While CAMA, which President Buhari signed into law on August 7, neither specifically addresses nor exempts nonprofit, nongovernmental, or religious organizations nor contains language about religion, some NGOs and religious organizations raised concerns about the law. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the prominent umbrella organization of the country's Christian groups, and NIREC criticized CAMA as possibly unconstitutionally infringing on freedom of

association and religion by placing some smaller religious organizations under the administrative control of government. Under the new law, the federal government has 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. On August 31, Buhari denied CAMA had any intentional religious discrimination and called on CAN to propose amendments to the law. On October 5 he appealed to those who were aggrieved with some laws to be patient and seek reforms in line with democratic practices.

NIREC, headed by the Sultan of Sokoto and the president of CAN, met in March to discuss insecurity and the rise of crime in the country as well as the probable impact of COVID-19 on the lives of citizens. NIREC called on people of all religions to follow government health regulations and maintain calm.

State-level actors, including government, traditional, religious, and civil society organizations, regularly negotiated resolution of disputes. In September, religious and community leaders in the ethnically and religiously diverse Jos North Local Government Area in Plateau State pledged to live in peace and enhance economic development and tranquility following a two-day workshop organized by the African Initiative for Peace Building and Advancement. On October 14, Nasarawa State governor Abdullahi Sule, a Muslim, inaugurated the headquarters of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ in Alushi, calling on all Christians and Muslims in the diverse state to support his efforts to enhance peace, unity, and the development of Nasarawa.

Due to what sources stated was the promotion of peaceful coexistence by Plateau State governor Simon Lalong, in October, the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna (JIBWIS) began reconstruction of a mosque that had been demolished during sectarian riots in 2004 in the predominantly Christian state.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to estimates from the Council on Foreign Relations online Nigeria Security Tracker, Islamist terrorist violence killed 881 persons (including security forces and civilians) during the year. More than 22,000 persons, most of them children, remained missing as a result of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency, according to an International Committee of the Red Cross statement in September.

Terrorist groups including Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacked population centers and religious targets and maintained a growing ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. The groups continued to carry out suicide bombings – many by drugging and forcing young women and girls to carry out the bombings – targeting the local civilian population, including churches and mosques. According to local media, on January 26, two girls blew themselves up outside a mosque in Borno State, killing two others and injuring 14 persons praying at the time. Local media further reported that on Christmas Eve, Boko Haram terrorists killed seven persons in a raid on a Christian village in Borno State and torched homes and a church.

In January, members of Boko Haram kidnapped, held for ransom, and later beheaded Reverend Lawan Andimi, a Christian pastor and chairman of a local chapter of CAN. Following the Andimi killing, President Buhari released an op-ed entitled, *Buhari: Pastor Andimi's faith should inspire all Nigerians*. In January, Boko Haram released a video in which a child soldier shoots a prisoner identified as a member of the Church of Christ in Nations. In the video, the shooter said the killing was in retaliation for Christian atrocities against Muslims in the country. According to media reports in February, more than 100 Boko Haram militants opened fire on civilians, set fire to houses, and burned down at least five churches in Garkida, Adamawa State. At a press conference in February, Minister of Information and Culture Lai Mohammed said of Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, “They have started targeting Christians and Christian villages for a specific reason, which is to trigger a religious war and throw the nation into chaos.”

ISIS-WA activity along the Maiduguri-Damaturu highway, the main humanitarian artery from neighboring Yobe State into Borno, included screenings at illegal checkpoints in Borno with the purported aim of detaining Christians, off-duty security force personnel, and humanitarian workers. On October 29, a security-focused NGO stated that suspected ISIS-WA operatives abducted three passengers they reportedly identified as Christians. Two of the three individuals were local NGO staff workers who were believed to remain in captivity at year's end.

On the sixth anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of 276 pupils from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in April 2014, 112 remained in captivity, according to government and media reports.

At year's end, Leah Sharibu, captured by ISIS-WA in February 2018, remained a captive, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Numerous fatal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders of mostly Fulani ethnicity. Scholars and other experts, including international NGOs, cited ethnicity, politics, religion, lack of accountability and access to justice, increasing competition over dwindling land and water resources, population growth, soil degradation, and internal displacement from crime and other forms of violence as drivers that contributed to the violence. According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's December 2020 report *Countries at Risk for Mass Killing 2020-21*, "violence [in Nigeria] is being perpetrated by many groups with a variety of motivations (e.g., land disputes, banditry, ethnic grievances, etc.) and though some may share an ethnicity and many of these groups target civilians, we do not see sufficient evidence that they are working in coordination as part of a campaign against a particular group of civilians." Several international and domestic experts noted that armed conflicts in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin had altered grazing routes and brought foreign transhumance (movement of livestock) groups in contact with new communities, sometimes leading to conflict because they were unaware of preexisting agreements between the local herding and farming groups. According to the UN, demographic and ecological pressures also exacerbated crime and intercommunal strife in the North Central and southern regions of the country in recent years. According to ACLED data, total civilian deaths numbered 2,454 during the year, compared with 2,198 in 2019 and 3,106 in 2018.

Multiple Christian NGOs stated that religious identity was a primary driver of the conflict between Muslim herdsman and Christian farmers.

The president of CAN, Reverend Samson Ayokunle, stated in a press conference on January 27 that the country was "under siege" by Boko Haram terrorists, Fulani terrorist herdsman, bandits, and kidnappers "with a goal to Islamize Nigeria." Ayokunle stated Muslim terrorists "have been going around invading predominantly Christian villages and towns...killing, maiming...and raping." The Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs reacted to what it said was Ayokunle's inflammatory language and voiced concerns that CAN was playing politics, fearmongering, and fueling divisive attitudes throughout the country.

According to *Morning Star News*, Fulani herdsman burned down a pastor's home and a church building on January 26 and 27 in Plateau State. *Morning Star News* reported that Fulani herdsman entered the home of Pastor Matthew Tagwaif of the

Evangelical Church Winning All in Ngbra Zongo village, Plateau State on April 7 and killed the pastor and three others including a 10-year-old boy. According to *Morning Star News*, Fulani herdsman entered a church in Tegina Kabata village, Niger State, on April 12 in which a wedding was taking place. They abducted the bride and groom and several other persons in attendance. Five other Christians were also killed in a series of attacks in the village.

There were also incidents of violence involving predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and settled farmers, who were both Muslim and Christian, in the North West region. On November 20, hundreds of individuals described as bandits attacked a mosque in Zamfara State during Friday prayers, killing at least five worshippers and abducting 30 members of the congregation, including the imam and other prominent members of the community. Zamfara governor Bello Mohammed Matawalle publicly condemned the attack and successfully organized the release of 11 kidnap victims.

Media reported that gang members kidnapped four Catholic seminary students on January 8 in Kaduna State. The gang subsequently released three of the victims but killed 18-year-old Michael Nnadi on January 31. On April 25, the Nigerian Police Force announced the capture and arrest of the Nnadi's alleged kidnappers and killers.

Media reported on October 5, armed bandits ransacked the St. Augustine Catholic Church in Benue State and robbed the parish priest and the church offertory at gunpoint. According to media reports, on September 29, 10 armed gang members entered a Pentecostal church in Akwa Ibom State during Sunday morning services and shot several parishioners.

On May 28, unknown gunmen abducted the CAN chairman of Nasarawa State, who was released unharmed several days later after a ransom of 20 million naira (\$51,900) had been paid.

The Southern Kaduna Peoples Union (SOKAPU), an organization stating it represents Christians in the southern part of Kaduna State, said that violence and criminality were neglected throughout the state, suggesting that publicized security measures were mostly for “political optics” and only served a particular segment of the population. SOKAPU said the creation of emirates and appointment of Muslim emirs in predominantly Christian chiefdoms had heightened tensions in southern Kaduna.

Interfaith activists such as Christian Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa of the Kaduna Interfaith Center said the government was not doing enough to combat thuggery and violence in their communities. In response to interethnic communal violence in southern Kaduna State in July and August, the Sultan of Sokoto decried the unwarranted killings of hundreds of Muslims and Christians as “madness that has to be stopped immediately.” CAN president Reverend Ayokunle, noting the conflict was predominantly ethnic, said he was ready to partner with the Kaduna State government to ensure the swift end of the crisis.

On October 24, in the wake of “#EndSARS” (referring to the Special Antirobbery Squad [SARS] arm of police) protests against alleged police brutality, Christian Igbo youths allegedly killed 11 Muslims in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, and burned down the central mosque in Orlu, Imo State. In November, Enugu State governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi ordered the immediate rebuilding of two mosques that had been destroyed during the #EndSARS protests in the Nsukka Local Government Area in the predominantly Christian state.

On June 17, the Muslim organization Society for the Support of Islam, known as Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), released a statement condemning the violent actions of Boko Haram in the country and criticizing the government for what it said was an insufficient response to stop the terrorist group. Several Christian leaders expressed support for JNI's statement.

There were several reported cases of young Christian girls being kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam throughout the year. For example, media reported that a 17-year-old girl went missing in Kaduna State on January 5. According to the report, on January 7, several men came to her father's house to tell him to attend a sharia court in which the judge read a predetermined judgment that the girl had to stay with her kidnappers. She later escaped, however, and returned to her parents. She said she had been kept in a locked room for more than a month and forced to convert to Islam. In April, media outlets reported there was outrage in the country concerning a video posted on social media showing the Kano State governor leading a Christian girl through the Islamic *shahada* prayer to show she accepted Islam. According to *World Watch Monitor*, a local source said the governor did not “force” anyone to convert to Islam but individuals instead came to him to convert. According to the Hausa Christians Foundation, six young women and an older married woman were kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam between March 23 and April 30. Five of the women were kidnapped in Kaduna State, one in Kano State, and one in Katsina State.

In May, a federal high court in Bayelsa State sentenced Yunusa Dahiru to 26 years in prison for abducting a Christian girl and forcing her to convert to Islam and marrying her in August 2015.

On February 2, CAN estimated that five million persons in 28 of the country's 36 states answered its call for a three-day fast, concluding in a prayer walk, to protest the persecution of Christians.

Due to restrictions on religious gatherings put into place in response to the coronavirus pandemic, many religious groups moved to online services and some increased their followers through virtual means. Christian and Muslim leaders largely worked together to ensure their followers helped to prevent the spread of coronavirus while raising awareness of the hardship the lockdowns had on those who could not provide for their families. In Kaduna State, Christian clerics and their Muslim counterparts sent encouraging text messages of tolerance and brotherhood on Easter.

In October, the Bible Society of Nigeria inaugurated two new areas in Osun and Oyo States. In November, the Jewish worldwide Chabad-Lubavitch movement established a second emissary position in the country in Lagos in addition to a previously established one in Abuja.

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 88 percent of Nigerian respondents considered religious freedom to be "very important," ranking it among highest of their priorities for democratic principles of the nine tested.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consulate general officials as well as visiting high-level U.S. government officials voiced concern over abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in meetings throughout the year with government officials, including the Vice President, cabinet secretaries, and National Assembly members. They also addressed religious tensions and efforts to bring religious groups together with several state governors, religious leaders, and other officials throughout the country. They discussed government and government-supported grassroots efforts

to reduce violence, combat insecurity, and promote religious freedom and interreligious tolerance.

Embassy and consulate general officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith relationship-building with a wide range of religious leaders and civil society organizations. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials engaged with various religious groups, including CAN, JNI, JIBWIS, and others throughout the year and delivered remarks on the importance of respect for religious freedom at large religious gatherings, such as the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace's Third Annual Peace Conference on Interreligious Dialogue: Strengthening the Culture of Peace, Reconciliation and Justice on January 22. To mark Religious Freedom Day on January 16, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable with religious leaders to discuss issues of peace and security and to promote religious freedom. In July, the embassy held a roundtable with prominent religious leaders from different churches and dioceses and discussed the violence occurring in the country, providing an overview of challenges and opportunities facing affected communities. In October, a visiting high-level delegation from the Department of State, led by the Counselor, met with various religious and government leaders to discuss the religious freedom environment. 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 funded peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna, Plateau, and Nasarawa. 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. "Peace ambassadors" from embassy-funded projects continued to work to bridge the gap between victims, traditional/religious leaders, and the security apparatus in Kajuru, Kaduna State. During the months of the countrywide lockdown, they visited potential conflict areas to support victims of crisis, provided support to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued to promote dialogue among stakeholders to deter reprisal attacks and promote sustainable peace.

The embassy expanded activities to reduce violent conflicts in the affected religious communities by promoting social cohesion, religious freedom, and the ability to mitigate community disputes peacefully without degenerating into ethnoreligious conflict. It also intensified its work on religious freedom issues through an existing five-year program in six northwest and north central states. This activity provided interfaith dialogue training to leaders with the goal of building capacity among communities to manage disputes. The program produced

English and Hausa-language radio programs designed to deepen community engagement in peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nigeria a “Country of Particular Concern” for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom and announced a waiver of sanctions that accompany designation in the “important national interest of the United States.”