

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**7**

## Nigeria



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

In terms of persecution, Christians suffer from a suffocating combination of Islamic oppression, ethno-religious hostility, dictatorial paranoia and organized corruption and crime. Most violence against civilians, especially Christians, occurs in the north (including the Middle Belt) and is perpetrated by Boko Haram,

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants and armed ‘bandits’. Such violence often causes loss of life, physical injury, rape and other forms of sexual harassment, as well as loss of property and destruction of farmlands. Abductions for ransom have increased considerably over recent years. As a result of the violence, Christians 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 Sharia states, 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 level of impunity. President Muhammadu Buhari has increasingly positioned Muslims in the most important government roles, which makes it harder for Christians who have suffered human rights violations to speak out. 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 herd farmer relationships. Under President Buhari, attacked Christian communities are often abandoned by the security forces, which are under federal command.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Muhammadu Buhari

### POPULATION

211,447,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

98,006,000 (46.4%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity (46.4%) and Islam (46.3%)

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	98,006,000	46.4
Muslims	97,999,000	46.3
Ethno-religionists	14,728,000	7.0
Agnostics	535,000	0.3

Source<sup>3</sup>

Having gained independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria’s democratic transition did not occur

until 1999, when 16 years of military rule ended. Buhari, from All Progressives Congress (APC) became president in 2015. Since then, attacks on Christians have become more aggressive. Buhari was controversially re-elected in February 2019, amid electoral violence and arbitrary rules made by the Electoral Commission in support of President Buhari. Over the past years, Nigeria has been fighting an insurgency in parts of the Niger Delta region, and Islamic militants in the north. Boko Haram, and its splinter group ISWAP, continue to threaten Christians, despite Buhari claiming that, in military terms, they have been defeated. In May 2021, ISWAP fighters [killed](#) rival Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, which may strengthen ISWAP’s foothold in north-eastern Nigeria. Raids by Fulani

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

militants on predominantly Christian farmers, in several northern states of Nigeria, have become a very serious problem. Violence has spread to some southern states. Roadblock killings and abductions have added to violence against Christians and others in the country. These create a threat to the existence of Christians. The government has failed to take any concrete action to contain the spread of attacks.

Nigeria has the largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa. However, poverty is widespread and almost 80% of the population live on less than US \$2 per day. Northern Nigeria is severely under-developed compared to the south. Corruption is rampant and a point of contention is the distribution of revenues received from oil. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a [collapse](#) of international oil prices. There are high rates of early marriage of girls, and teen pregnancy. 18% of girls are married before their 15th birthday. Some Christian parents, fearful their daughters might be attacked, choose to have them marry early in order to protect them. This results in girls growing up uneducated, ignorant of their rights and economically dependent on men.

Nigeria has low life expectancy and a [low](#) literacy rate. The country accounts for about [half](#) of West Africa's population and has one of the world's largest youth populations. In December 2020, there were 2.7m internally displaced people (IDPs) due to conflict. Internet freedom is restricted by the 2015 Cybercrime Act, which is widely used to arrest and prosecute journalists and bloggers in an arbitrary manner. The media is biased against Christians, often portraying them as infidels and second-class citizens, and anti-Christian hate speech from leaders of violent Islamic groups is spread on social media.

Human rights violations are carried out by numerous groups. In north east Nigeria, Boko Haram has carried

out a systematic campaign against the Nigerian state, proclaiming an Islamic caliphate in Borno State in 2014. Boko Haram specifically targets Christians, as well as all those who do not support them. In raids, Christian males are abducted or killed, while Christian females are abducted, raped and forcibly married as part of the mission to depopulate Christian-dominated territories. ISWAP carries out similar activities, and with the death of Boko Haram leader Shekau their foothold might increase in north eastern Nigeria. Both groups have pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS).

Fulani militants attack predominantly Christian villages in several northern states (including North-central), abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands. The violence has rapidly expanded further south.

## How the situation varies by region

Nigeria has six geo-political zones. Each zone had its own profile of hostilities against Christians (and others). Violence in the North-east zone was and is mainly perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISWAP. In the North-west zone there were/are the armed bandits. In the North-central zone, including Kaduna State, there were/are Fulani militants. These profiles have intermingled, so the situation has become very problematic for all civilians and particularly for Christians. The federal government and a large number of state governments are silently pushing towards Nigeria becoming a Sharia state. This is not limited to the three northern geopolitical zones but has already extended into the three southern geopolitical zones, particularly the South-west zone and the South-east zone.



## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

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 militant groups and armed bandits. They also face discrimination from the local authorities, especially in the northern states (and also North-central zone). Violence is extending into the southern states, as is land grabbing and community intimidation by (armed) Fulani herdsmen.

### Converts to Christianity

These are mostly converts from Islam to Christianity. They are often forced to find refuge in 'safe houses' due to the danger of severe persecution and potential killing. Muslim converts to Christianity from northern Nigeria (including the Muslim majority areas in North-central zone) often have to flee their homes and states to escape being killed or harassed. This is less likely to occur in the south, although it happens to a limited degree in south west areas. There is pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity in other parts of the country too, but this is less frequent and with (much) less intensity than elsewhere.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

The Evangelical and Pentecostal communities now make up a considerable proportion of the Nigerian church. In the northern states (including the North-central), the Evangelical and Pentecostal communities face discrimination by the local authorities, as well as violent attacks against their life and property by militant groups and armed bandits. Violence is also extending into the southern states, as is land grabbing and community intimidation by (armed) Fulani herdsmen.



## 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. Twelve northern states are governed by Sharia law and President Buhari, a Fulani himself, arguably uses his position to appoint Muslims to key positions. 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 go largely unnoticed. Ethnic group leaders perpetrate all four sources of religious freedom violations as do government officials, violent religious groups and ideological pressure groups. Non-Christian (especially Muslim) religious leaders have perpetrated violations against Christians through intolerant ideology and incitement to violence. In the north east, radical Islamists such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to target civilians, especially Christians. The same applies for violence committed by Fulani militants in the North-central zone and other northern states, as well as several southern states. Added to this, there is violence committed by armed bandits. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) is an ideological pressure group with powerful patrons, which protects Fulani militants and justifies their actions. President Buhari is one of their patrons. 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 cartels.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Raids by Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed bandits have terrorized Christian communities, particularly in the north. Women are raped, kidnapped for ransom and killed. Christian girls are abducted by militants and forced into marriages as a tactic to depopulate Christian-dominated territory. Some women even forced to act as suicide bombers or fighters. When women are raped, their husbands sometimes find it difficult to move past the trauma. They may even view their wife as tarnished, particularly if they have become pregnant; many homes have broken up because of this. Increasingly, there are reports about these violations happening to Christian women and girls in the south too.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied/restricted healthcare
- 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
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

## MEN

Christian men are targeted and killed by Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed bandits. This serves to eliminate the current generation of males, but also guarantees that the birthrate of Christian families will fall. Survivors face forced inclusion in militant ranks. Young boys risk being recruited as child soldiers. Church leaders are regularly abducted for ransom, as are many others. 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.

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	7	87.43
2021	9	85.34
2020	12	79.98
2019	12	79.92
2018	14	77.17

*The rise of two points is due to pressure rising in all spheres of life, while the violence score remains at the maximum level. Christians continue to be attacked indiscriminately and brutally in northern Nigeria and the violence and insecurity has also spread to southern Nigeria. Fulani militants and armed 'bandits' have settled in southern forests, making access to farmlands increasingly difficult for Christian farmers. They also form a threat to Christian women and girls. In the WWL 2022 reporting period it has also become increasingly clear that Christians (and other minority groups) cannot count on the security apparatus for their protection, which is under the command of the federal government.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In April 2021**, so called ‘bandits’ abducted 22 students and a member of staff from Greenfields University in Kaduna state (a private college mainly for Christians). Within a week, five of the kidnapped students were killed.
- **In August 2021**, 70 people from the Irigwe tribe were killed in Plateau State by gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsmen.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians internally displaced
2022	4650	10	1000	10,000
2021	3530	25	1000	1000

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

## Private life

Converts to Christianity from Islam in northern Nigeria (including parts of North-central and South states) often have to flee to escape being harassed or killed by family and 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 at roadblocks set up by violent Islamic groups. Living in a (mainly) Christian community in the rural areas of several states is very risky and leads to high levels of fear. The same applies for many Christians living as IDPs in unsafe environments.

## Family life

Several aspects make family life difficult for Christians, especially in the northern states (including parts of the North-central and South too). Converts from Islam fear discovery of their new faith by their families; it could mean the loss of child custody or the need 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 North-central and increasingly in 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 are 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 access this resource. 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 areas with equal amounts of Christians and Muslims. Among IDPs, Christians are often left out in the distribution of relief.



### National life

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. The evidence of a Christian 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 (including North-central zone), churches are destroyed, and pastors (together with their families) 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. In an atmosphere of chaos and impunity, speaking out against the human rights violations of Christians and other Nigerians is risky. Insecurity has spread to several southern states.



## International obligations & rights violated

### Nigeria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

### Nigeria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- The state is manifestly failing to protect Nigerian Christians' fundamental rights (ICCPR Art. 2)
- Christians are murdered in indiscriminate attacks (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian women are raped, gang raped and sexually abused (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christian children are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts in the northern states (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Converts to Christianity suffer from discrimination and violence in the northern states and several southern states (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 26)

## Situation of other religious minorities

The Shiites (Islamic Movement of Nigeria) have been victims of violations from Sunni groups. Members were killed and leaders imprisoned by the government, which justified its actions by saying they are confronting a group which seeks to operate under separate laws. Fulani, especially those that have settled alongside Christians, are sometimes confronted with retaliation attacks carried out by Christian youths. There are several reports about violations against practitioners of African Traditional Religion (ATR).



### Open Doors in Nigeria

Open Doors has been involved in Nigeria since the early 1990s. Our programs include training and education, legal assistance to persecuted Christians and churches, trauma counselling and emergency relief.

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

---