



## **Religious Freedom in Nigeria:**

### **The Problem of Religious Strife in Africa's Largest Nation**

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On May 1, 2009, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom released its Annual Report that documents violations of religious freedom around the world. Countries engaging in the most serious forms of religious freedom abuses are listed as “countries of particular concern.” Among the countries featured in the 2009 Report are some of the usual suspects such as Burma, North Korea, China, and Saudi Arabia. What has created significant attention, however, is the appearance of Nigeria on the list of most serious abusers for the first time in the 10-year history of the Commission.

Despite the fact that Nigeria's constitution includes a number of provisions guaranteeing religious freedom, its large and diverse population has faced ongoing sectarian and ethnic tensions. The Nigerian population of more than 140 million is roughly divided between Muslims and Christians—a context rife with potential conflict. Many of the problems in Nigeria are localized and involve the treatment of minority faiths in some of Nigeria's 36 states. Christian minorities in Muslim-dominated Nigerian states and vice versa face ongoing discrimination in employment as well as government services and benefits.

The religious tensions in Nigeria have often become violent. According to the Commission Report, “since 1999, a disturbingly large number of Nigerians—12,000, if not more—have been killed in sectarian and communal attacks and reprisals between Muslims and Christians.” The most recent examples of this strife, in the city of Jos and in parts of the Bauchi state, have resulted in hundreds if not thousands of deaths as well as 10,000 or more Nigerians displaced. The 2009 Report is particularly critical of the Nigerian government for its lack of efforts to investigate or curb this religious violence. “Put simply,” the commissioners concluded “the Nigerian Government has permitted religious violence and other severe violations of the freedom of religion to occur with impunity.”

Of particular concern to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is the expansion of the use of sharia in criminal law cases in 12 northern Nigerian states. Some Nigerian states support religious police that enforce sharia laws whose punishments include stoning, amputation, and flogging. There are few protections for the criminally accused under the sharia and women are particularly vulnerable to some of the discriminatory practices under the system. Such punishments and practices violate “prohibition(s) against inhuman or degrading treatment under international human rights standards and treaties” according to the 2009 Report.

In addition to identifying Nigeria as a “country of particular concern” the 2009 Report calls on the United States government to enter into a binding agreement with Nigeria that would obligate the Nigerian government to take affirmative steps to curb religious freedom abuses in her country. It also calls on the U.S. to provide “technical and programmatic assistance” as well as “expanding presence and outreach efforts” to help prevent religious conflict and oppose religious extremism.

As Africa’s most populous nation, Nigeria illustrates that religious and ethnic conflict and discrimination is a reality for far too many people around the world. It is also a reminder that constitutional provisions alone do not guarantee religious freedom for even members of large religions. While the roots of religious and ethnic conflict in Nigeria are multifaceted, it is evident that protection of religious freedom must be a principled commitment of those wielding authority at both the local and national levels.

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The mission of The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor Center for Religious Liberty is to advance religious liberty for all persons, in all parts of the world, without regard to their religious, ethnic, gender, racial or national background. Religious liberty is a basic human right that must be nourished and protected by all human societies; it is the cornerstone of modern societies' efforts to build a more peaceful world. The Center advances this mission by publishing relevant literature, hosting and sponsoring lectureships and conferences, sharing its expertise with media and other public information outlets, and partnering with other persons and groups who share the goal of advancing religious liberty. The web site for the Center can be found at [www.umhb.edu/academics/crl](http://www.umhb.edu/academics/crl)