

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

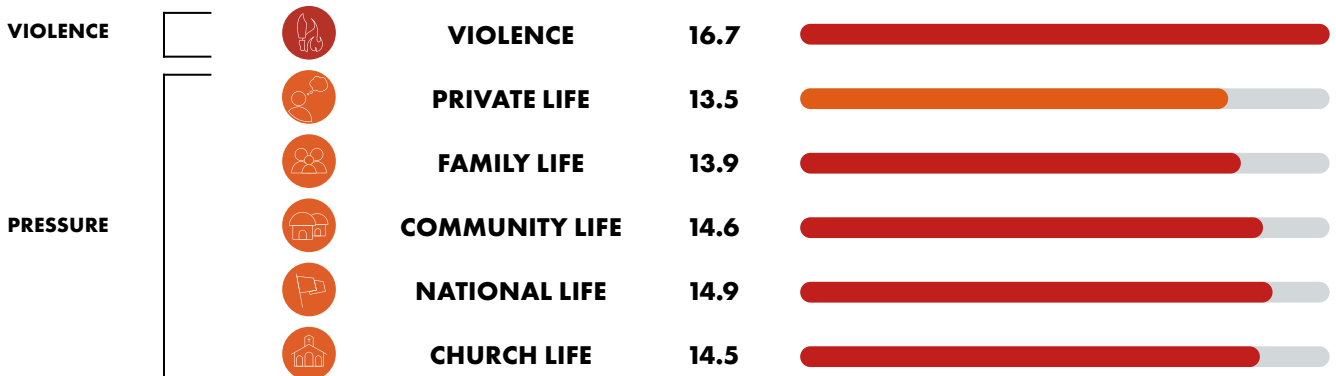
## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

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).

### Key findings

Christians suffer from a suffocating combination of *ethno-religious hostility, Islamic oppression, religious nationalism, 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), Fulani militants and different groups of armed bandits. Data from the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa show that by far the most violence against civilians is committed by these Fulani militants and armed bandit groups compared to Boko Haram and ISWAP.

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. Current President Tinubu has partially reversed this trend. 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 herdsmen and their cattle southwards and putting additional stress on herder-farmer relationships.

Particularly worrying are two new trends. Firstly, a new jihadist terror group, “Lakurawa”, has emerged in the North West, armed with advanced weaponry and a radical Islamist agenda. Lakurawa is affiliated with the expansionist Al-Qaeda insurgency Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin originating in Mali and is referred to as JNIM. Secondly, [reports have surfaced](#) about the emergence of a unified ISWAP-Boko Haram front. According to a Nigerian security analyst, it seems to confirm an ongoing alliance between jihadist groups in the Sahel.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu

### POPULATION

229,152,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

106,608,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

| Religious Context  | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians         | 106,608,000         | 46.5       |
| Muslims            | 105,322,000         | 46.0       |
| Ethno-religionists | 16,417,000          | 7.2        |
| Agnostics          | 592,000             | 0.3        |

Source<sup>2</sup>

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 officeholders (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; this has continued and [Tinubu has been criticized](#) for the lack of representation of other ethnic groups (Politics Nigeria, 10 March 2024). According

<sup>1</sup> Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. The WWL 2025 reporting period clearly shows that he has not yet succeeded in this respect.

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 a 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 and 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.

Although 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.

Militants attack predominantly Christian villages in several northern states, killing, raping and abducting 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, many of them Fulanis, are also responsible for violence where they rape, kill, and burn property but most notably abduct people and subject communities to serfdom. Boko Haram and ISWAP keep targeting Christians, particularly Christian leaders, but in smaller numbers than Fulani militants and armed bandit groups. 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 2023, Nigeria accounted for more than [3.3 million internally displaced people](#) (IDPs) due to the violence, many of whom are Christians. All this violence spreads fear and creates extreme levels of vulnerability for Christians (and other



Nigerians) on many levels, traumatizing people in a country where trauma counseling services are extremely scarce in relation to the need. Abduction has become an industry, leading to 'intergenerational bankruptcy' where families have one of their members abducted, with a huge ransom demanded in return for the victim. This is also the case for Christian parishes or congregations when priests or pastors are abducted and the community impoverishes itself to raise the ransom.

The apparent failure of the government to protect civilians has widespread effects with [more than 10,000 schools being closed down in Northern Nigeria](#) due to the current insecurity, consigning millions of children to illiteracy, early marriage and poverty (EDUGIST, reporting on 4 February 2024). This makes recruitment for Islamic militancy easier, leading to a worsening spiral of violence and oppression.

## 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 multiple groups of armed bandits. In the north central, including Kaduna State, there were Fulani militants. However, the [areas of operation](#) of Fulani militants and armed bandit groups merged into each other and partly overlapped. (ORFA, 29 August 2024) "Lakurawa" has emerged in the North. Lakurawa is affiliated with the expansionist Al-Qaeda insurgency *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* originating in Mali and is referred to as JNIM. 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 is sometimes 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 bandit groups 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. Their experience is comparable to the historical Christian communities. 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 bandit groups. Violence against them has also extended into the southern states.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY, ISLAMIC OPPRESSION, RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM, 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 mostly northern Muslims to key positions in the security apparatus and important economic sectors. His successor, President Tinubu, established a better balance between Muslim and Christian critical officeholders, although he has been criticized for his continued appointments of Muslims from his own state. Notwithstanding changes made by President Tinubu, the whole country manifests 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. Islamist radical groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to target civilians, especially Christians. The same applies, to an even greater extent, to violence committed by Fulani militants and 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 Fulani militants, multiple groups of armed bandits, and terror groups Boko Haram and ISWAP have terrorized Christian communities. Women and girls are abducted, raped, sexually enslaved, and killed by militants. In addition to being “married,” girls abducted by militants have reportedly been used as human shields or leverage in negotiations. 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. Christian women and girls are often additionally vulnerable to sexual violence in IDP camps.

### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- 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
- 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 Fulani militants, armed bandits, Boko Haram and ISWAP. 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. In IDP camps Christian men and boys are often additionally vulnerable to physical violence and killing.

### 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

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2025     | 7                                       | 88                                   |
| 2024     | 6                                       | 88                                   |
| 2023     | 6                                       | 88                                   |
| 2022     | 7                                       | 87                                   |
| 2021     | 9                                       | 85                                   |

Both pressure and violence scores (the latter at the maximum level possible) have remained largely unchanged in the WWL 2025 reporting period. Christians and their communities continue to be attacked in many parts of the country. In the foregoing year, the new president Bola Ahmed Tinubu carried out a major reshuffle, which provided a better representative balance of the two faiths in leadership positions than was in place under his predecessor Muhammadu Buhari. The hope was that this would cause a positive shift towards acknowledging the extent of human rights violations being perpetrated against Christians, and lead to more effective intervention by security forces to protect Christians. However, this did not happen to a tangible extent in the WWL 2025 reporting period.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- December 2023:** [Horrific attacks on sleeping villages in Nigeria’s Plateau State](#) starting on December 23 were mounted by more than 3,000 terrorists fanning out to 38 villages for simultaneous attacks or marching from village to village. Battalions of armed terrorists shouting “Allahu Akbar [God is great]” according to witnesses raided villages for eight days, killing at minimum 295 people, as documented by a local monitoring group known as Plateau Civil Society Organizations Forum.

| WWL Year | Christians killed | Christians abducted | Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted | Christians physically or mentally abused |
|----------|-------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| 2025     | 3100              | 2830                | 1000*                                      | 10,000*                                  |
| 2024     | 4118              | 3300                | 1000*                                      | 10,000*                                  |

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country’s corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*.*

### 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 abduction 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**

Depending on the region, migrants can gather in (house) churches but face serious security risks. Bringing Arabic Christian literature and Bibles into the country remains strictly forbidden. Proselytizing or missionary activity among Muslims is officially prohibited.

## **International obligations & rights violated**

**Nigeria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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)
- Christians 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

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 August 2024, the number attacked and killed from October 2019-September 2023 was at least 154, and the number abducted was at least 184.

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.) Most of this violence is from Fulani militants and bandit groups against Hausa Muslims.

While Shia Muslims as a whole are not banned in Nigeria, the specific organization known as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) has been declared illegal by court order (July 26, 2019) due to its classification as a terrorist organization. This situation creates an environment where Shia practices associated with this movement may be severely restricted or persecuted.

## Open Doors in Nigeria

Open Doors has been involved in Nigeria since the early 1990s. Our vision to see a church that is holistic in its mission, responding to emerging persecution trends and becoming visible in the political and socio-economic space through:

- Persecution preparedness training and support
- Economic empowerment
- New believer care
- Discipleship
- Mobilization





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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published 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: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

Open Doors Sverige  
sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00  
www.open-doors.se