

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

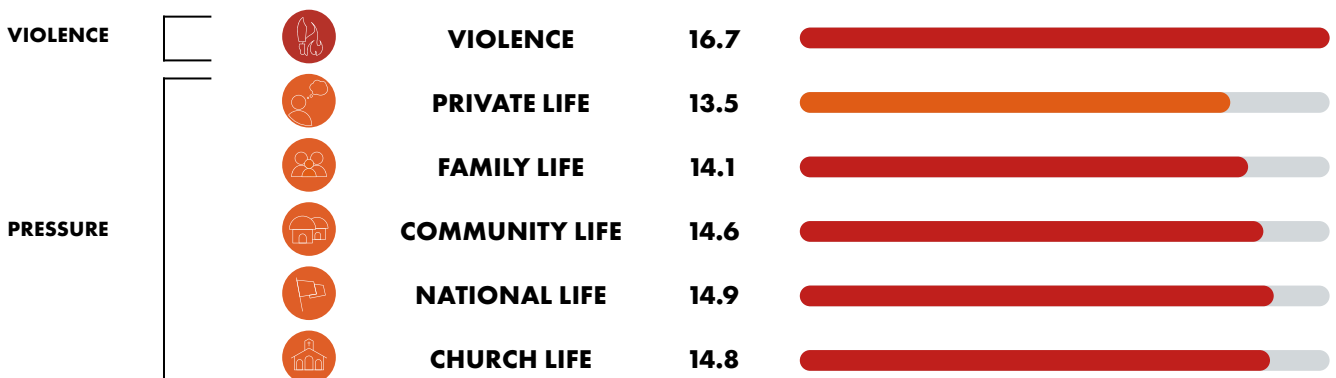
## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

### NIGERIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**7**



#### 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 severe combination of ethno-religious hostility, Islamic oppression, Dictatorial paranoia and Organized corruption and crime. Mostly in northern Sharia-governed states, Christians are deprived of essential freedoms. All over the north, Christians suffer from Islamist militant violence by different groups. Most of the violence against Christians is carried out by Muslim Fulani militants and “bandits” of Fulani descent, more than by Boko Haram and ISWAP combined ([ORFA, August 2024](#)). In recent years, violence has increased and spilled into southern states. Much of it is done by Muslim Fulani militia hiding in the forests of southern states and performing guerilla-style attacks. Another contributor to insecurity for Christians in the south-east is IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra). IPOB has also oppressed and persecuted Christians, particularly Christian leaders, who do not conform to its ideological requirements. Many southern states have witnessed a revival of African traditional religion, sometimes encouraged by state governments. This may lead to Clan oppression. Christians are forced to obey traditional religious concepts they consider contrary to their Christian beliefs.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu

### POPULATION

234,574,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

107,275,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam (46,9%) and Christianity (45,7%)

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	107,275,000	45.7
Muslims	110,058,000	46.9
Ethnic religionists	16,432,000	7.0
Others	809,000	0.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

Nigeria's democratic transition did not occur until 1999, when 16 years of military rule ended. According to its constitution, Nigeria is a secular nation. However, since 1999, Sharia law has been established in 12 northern states.

Buhari, from the All Progressives Congress (APC), was president from 2015-2023. After coming to power in May 2023, President Tinubu established a better balance between Muslim and Christian critical officeholders. He also favored Muslims from the south-west, his own region, while reducing the influence of Muslims from the north. One of his stated priorities was to take decisive action against perpetrators of violence in the country. So far, this has not been successful.

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. 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.

In the 'culture of violence' created by a variety of Islamist terror groups, Christians have for many years been particularly vulnerable. Well-known names are Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, and more recently, Lakurawa and Mahmuda. Much inspiration for their Islamic purist agendas comes from the Izala Movement, which was founded in 1978 in Jos, Plateau State. It began as a reformist group aiming to eliminate religious innovations and promote the Sunnah, the traditional practices and lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad.

The conflict, once mainly about religion, has more recently shifted to ethno-religious warfare by Muslim Fulani militants against Christians (and increasingly against Hausa Muslims). Militants attacked predominantly Christian villages in several northern states, killing, raping and abducting people, destroying churches and other buildings as well as harvests or occupying farmlands and even communities. In recent years, the steady influx of Fulani militants from neighboring countries has added to the threat of violence. Violence has spread to southern states too.

The 'abduction industry' has become a feared phenomenon, leading to 'intergenerational bankruptcy' where families have members kidnapped and are forced to pay huge ransoms to get them back. This is also the case for Christian parishes or

<sup>1</sup> Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

<sup>2</sup> Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

congregations when priests or pastors are abducted, and the communities impoverish themselves to raise the ransom.

The failure of the government to protect civilians has widespread effects on education, consigning millions of children to illiteracy, early marriage, and poverty. This makes recruitment for Islamist militancy easier, leading to a worsening spiral of violence.

At the end of 2024, Nigeria accounted for [3.4 million internally displaced people](#) (IDPs) due to violence, many of whom are Christians.

## How the situation varies by region

Violence in the north-east was mainly perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISWAP, religious ideological groups who have declared their intents against Christians and anyone who does not adhere to their extremist ideology.

The north-west saw the presence of many so-called armed bandits, many of whom are of Fulani descent. Armed bandits' operations increasingly appeared ethno-religious in nature, killing Hausa regardless of their faith and specifically targeting Christians regardless of their ethnicity. While not all bandit violence in the north-west was jihadist-related, credible evidence demonstrated that some bandit groups have aligned with jihadist networks and fund jihadist aims through kidnapping for ransom. The north-central region, responsible for a significant portion of Nigeria's food production, faced an unprecedented convergence of threats from existing and newly emerging Islamist terror groups who predominantly attack Christian communities ([ORFA, May 2025](#)), including:

- The emergence of Lakurawa in Sokoto and Kebbi states
- 
- Mahmuda group establishing presence in Kwara and parts of Niger state
- 
- Ansaru terror cells setting up operations in Kogi state
- 
- Resurgence of Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM) attacks in Plateau and Benue states.

The Fulani militants continue to wreak the most destruction and account for the majority of deaths of Christians in Nigeria. The more so, if "bandits" of Fulani descent are included in the counts.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY, ISLAMIC OPPRESSION, DICTATORIAL PARANOIA AND ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Nigeria manifests a culture of impunity where the fundamental rights of Christians are not upheld and where violations against Christians, and increasingly against non-Fulani Muslims too, are not addressed.

Twelve northern states are governed by Sharia law. Violent attacks by different religious and ethno-religious groups are rampant. Former President Buhari had appointed mostly northern Muslims to key positions in the security apparatus. Under President Tinubu critical security positions are still held by northern Fulani Muslims. Meanwhile Muslim Fulani militants in the Middle Belt face little confrontation by security forces.

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 and Muslims who don't align with them. The same applies, to an even greater extent, to violence committed by Muslim Fulani militants and by different groups of armed "bandits", many of Fulani descent. 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.

### CLAN OPPRESSION

In many southern states contributes to the persecution of Christians. Christians are subject to serious punishment for refusing to participate in traditional rites because of their faith. This punishment may involve the payment of certain levies, beating, or public disgrace (such as stripping the person naked).



## 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 by the different religious and ethno-religious terror groups and discrimination from the local authorities, especially in the northern states.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

These are mostly converts from Islam. Muslim converts to Christianity, mostly from northern Nigeria,

often have to flee their homes and states to escape being harassed or even killed.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Their experience is comparable to the historical Christian communities. Especially 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 religious and ethno-religious terror groups.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Christian women and girls in Nigeria face extreme risks from Muslim Fulani militants, Boko Haram and ISWAP fighters, and so-called bandits. They are raped, forced into sexual slavery or marriage, abducted for ransom, or killed. Blasphemy accusations add further dangers. Widespread child marriage compounds the vulnerability of girls. Women often witness their husbands and sons being beaten or killed. In IDP camps, Christian women and girls face sexual violence or forced marriage.

### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

Christian men and boys in Nigeria face targeted killings by Muslim Fulani militia and other terror groups. Survivors risk forced conscription, or ransom kidnappings. Men face systemic discrimination in education, employment, and business. In IDP camps, men are deeply traumatized by being forced to witness violence against their wives and daughters. Some attempt to return to their villages to cultivate their fields and help their families survive, but returnees risk ambush and death.

### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- 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
2026	7	89
2025	7	88
2024	6	88
2023	6	88
2022	7	87

The overall pressure score increased by 0.6 points compared to WWL 2025. The violence score remained at the maximum level possible. States that have implemented Sharia law, though unconstitutional, remained unchallenged. Christians and their communities continued to be attacked and live in fear in many parts of the country. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has yet to fulfill his commitment to take decisive action against those responsible for violence in the country ([The Insight, 13 June 2023](#)). While the WWL 2025 reporting period showed some improvement in the number of Christians killed in attacks by Islamist terror groups, fatalities rose again during the WWL 2026 reporting period.





## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **11 March 2025:** 22 Christians were abducted from Chibiya community in Maro ward in Kajuru LGA of Kaduna state. Most of them were women. They were abducted by Fulani militants who were insisting on a peace deal that allowed armed Fulani Ethnic Militia members to reside in the community.
- **14 April 2025:** Zike, a Christian community in Bassa LGA of Plateau state, came under a midnight attack by Fulani militants chanting Allahu Akubar. The attack took place despite a military operation base less than 3 miles from the community. 51 Christians, mostly women and children, were killed.
- **13-14 June 2025:** The Christian farming community of Yelwata, in Guma LGA of Benue state, came under a 4-hour attack by Fulani militants with little or no intervention by the military. 258 people, mostly women and children, were slaughtered with machetes, shot or burnt to death.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused
2026	3,490	2,293	1,000*	10,000*
2025	3,100	2,830	1,000*	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 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 Islamist militant groups. Living in a Christian community in the rural areas of many states, or as IDPs, can be very risky and lead to high levels of fear.

## FAMILY LIFE

Christians face serious challenges in family life. 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 situations.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Mostly in northern Nigeria, 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. 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 should. In some rural areas, Christians have been denied water. Even in cities, the Christian quarters are sometimes denied amenities such as sanitation services. Among IDPs, Christians are often left out of the distribution of relief.

Research illustrates the specific vulnerabilities of displaced Christians ([No Road Home, September 2024](#)). They have been singled out for violence, face harsh living conditions, and experience faith-based challenges throughout their displacement journey.

## NATIONAL LIFE

Easy accusations of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion are forcing Christians in northern Nigeria to be very careful in discussions with Muslims, as their words can easily be used against them and have deadly consequences. In general, there is a climate of impunity; those who attack Christians and their properties are hardly ever arrested. 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 outlets can under-report or distort attacks against Christians by Muslims.

## CHURCH LIFE

Churches are destroyed, and church leaders abducted or executed. The same happens to many other Christians. Church activities are monitored, hindered, or obstructed. Christians are also denied land for building churches. Openly integrating Muslim converts could provoke violence against the church, 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.





## 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)
- 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, mainly in the northern states (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 26)

## Situation of other religious minorities

African Traditional Religionists have faced attacks and abductions. Increasingly, Muslims have been killed and/or abducted by the same groups that killed or abducted Christians, and also had to flee their homes. Most of this violence was from Muslim Fulani militants and related “bandit” groups against Hausa Muslims. The Shia-based Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) is still classified as a banned terrorist organization by Nigerian authorities as of September 2025, with its activities considered illegal by the Nigerian government.





## Open Doors in Nigeria

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

- Biblical life formation/contextual discipleship
- Sustainable livelihoods/economic resilience building
- Persecution response pathways
- New believer discipleship and support
- Prophetic voice



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## ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.