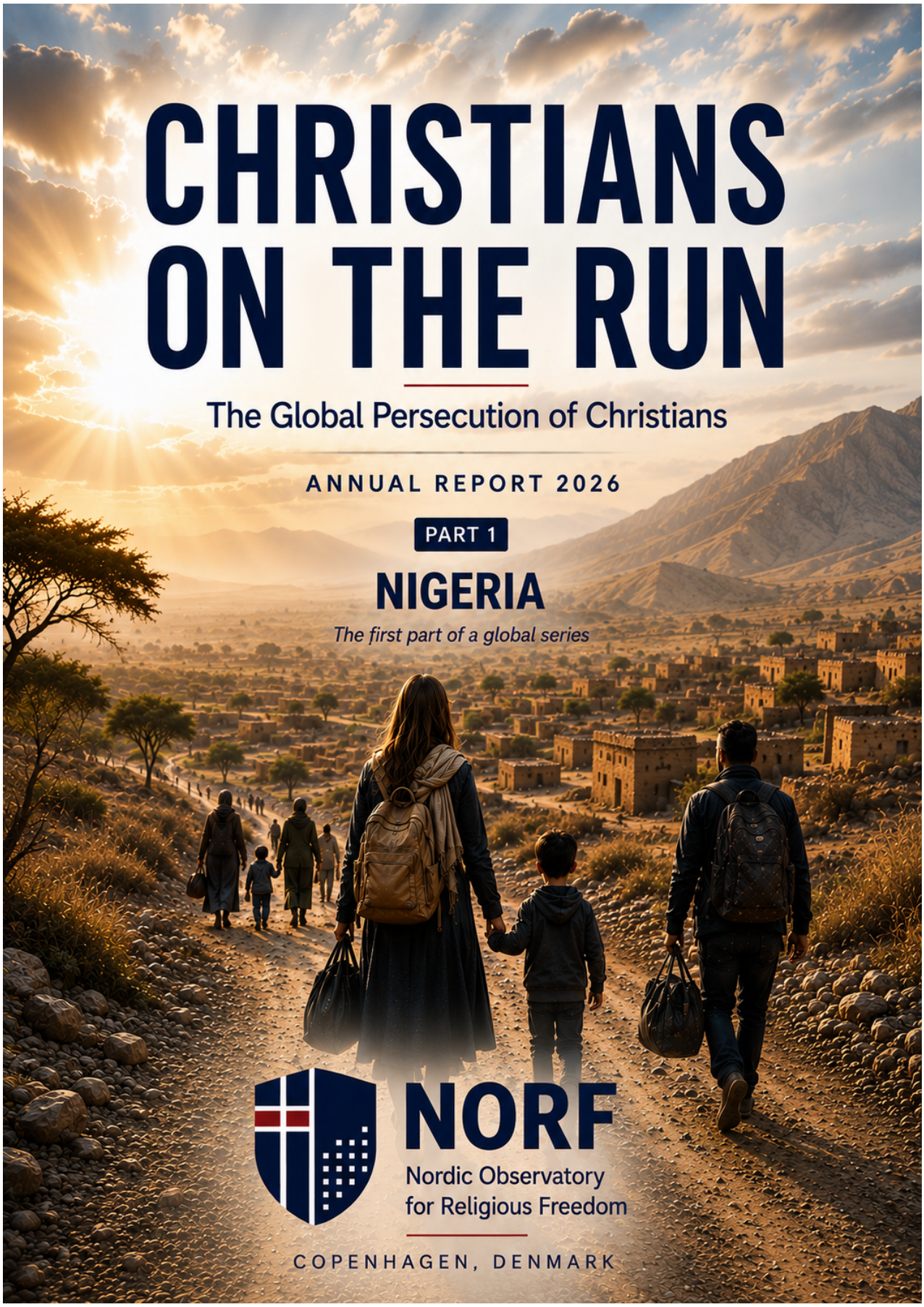

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN
The Global Persecution of Christians
ANNUAL REPORT 2026
PART 1
NIGERIA
The first part of a global series
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

3.B Nigeria

3.B.1 Historical Development

From Ancient Kingdoms to a Multi-Religious Federal Republic

Understanding Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in contemporary Nigeria requires a long-term historical perspective. Nigeria's current religious landscape did not emerge suddenly through modern politics or recent conflict. Rather, it reflects more than a millennium of interaction between indigenous belief systems, Islam, Christianity, colonial governance, demographic change and post-independence state formation.

The NORF methodology therefore examines Nigeria's historical development not simply as chronology, but as an analysis of the historical drivers that continue to shape the country's legal framework, religious demography, societal relations and security environment. This historical perspective provides the essential context for understanding both present challenges and future developments relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Indigenous Civilisations Before Islam and Christianity

Long before the arrival of Islam or Christianity, the territory now known as Nigeria was home to numerous sophisticated societies with diverse political systems, economies and religious traditions.

Archaeological evidence from the **Nok Culture** (c. 1500 BCE–300 CE) demonstrates the existence of one of sub-Saharan Africa's earliest complex societies, known for advanced ironworking and distinctive terracotta sculpture. Although little is known about Nok religious practice, archaeological findings indicate ritual activity associated with ancestor veneration, sacred landscapes and spiritual authority.

Following the decline of the Nok civilisation, several powerful kingdoms and city-states emerged across present-day Nigeria, including the Hausa city-states in the north, the Kanem–Bornu Empire to the northeast, the Yoruba kingdoms of Ife and Oyo in the southwest, the Kingdom of Benin in the south, and numerous Igbo political communities in the southeast.

Despite their political diversity, these societies generally shared religious traditions characterised by belief in a supreme creator, veneration of ancestors, reverence for spiritual intermediaries and a close relationship between religious authority and political leadership. Religious practice was deeply integrated into governance, justice, agriculture and communal identity.

Unlike the exclusive monotheistic traditions that later entered the region, indigenous religions generally accommodated considerable local variation while remaining closely connected to ethnicity, kinship and territory.

The Arrival and Expansion of Islam

Islam reached northern Nigeria gradually between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries through trans-Saharan trade networks linking the central Sudan with North Africa and the wider Islamic world.

Merchants, scholars and jurists introduced Islamic learning alongside commercial exchange. The Kanem–Bornu Empire became one of the earliest major political entities in West Africa to adopt Islam, followed by several Hausa kingdoms whose rulers increasingly incorporated Islamic scholarship and legal principles into state administration.

The spread of Islam was not primarily achieved through military conquest but through trade, diplomacy, scholarship and political patronage. Islamic education flourished, and cities such as Kano and Katsina developed into important centres of learning connected to broader intellectual networks extending across North Africa, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

A decisive turning point occurred in the early nineteenth century with the **Sokoto Jihad** (1804–1808), led by the Islamic scholar **Usman dan Fodio**. The movement criticised corruption, inconsistent application of Islamic law and perceived deviations from Islamic teaching among the Hausa rulers. Its success resulted in the establishment of the **Sokoto Caliphate**, which became one of the largest pre-colonial states in Africa.

The Caliphate institutionalised Islamic governance across much of northern Nigeria, expanding Islamic courts, religious education and administrative structures that continued to influence governance well into the colonial period.

This historical development remains highly significant because many contemporary debates concerning Sharia, Islamic courts and religious authority in northern Nigeria trace their institutional origins to this period.

Christianity and European Contact

Christianity first reached the Nigerian coast through Portuguese traders during the late fifteenth century. Early missionary activity, however, remained geographically limited and achieved relatively modest long-term influence.

The substantial expansion of Christianity occurred during the nineteenth century, particularly following the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Missionary societies from Britain and other European countries established churches, schools, printing presses and medical facilities across southern Nigeria.

Unlike the earlier spread of Islam through trans-Saharan networks, Christian expansion became closely associated with European colonial influence and the rapid development of Western-style education.

Mission schools played a particularly important role in shaping modern Nigeria. They educated many of the country's future political leaders, civil servants and professionals while significantly expanding literacy and access to formal education.

The concentration of missionary activity in southern Nigeria contributed to the emergence of distinct regional patterns of religious affiliation that remain evident today.

Colonial Rule and Religious Geography

British colonial rule fundamentally reshaped Nigeria's political and religious landscape.

Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, British authorities governed an extraordinarily diverse territory comprising hundreds of ethnic groups, multiple legal traditions and distinct religious communities.

The colonial administration adopted a policy of **indirect rule**, particularly in northern Nigeria, where existing Islamic institutions and traditional rulers were largely preserved. Islamic courts continued to function in many areas, while Christian missionary activity was significantly more restricted than in the south.

In contrast, southern Nigeria experienced extensive missionary expansion, rapid educational development and increasing integration into colonial administrative structures.

Although this policy contributed to political stability from the colonial administration's perspective, it also reinforced regional differences in educational attainment, administrative development and religious affiliation.

Many of the constitutional and legal debates concerning religion in contemporary Nigeria therefore have historical roots in these differing colonial governance models.

Independence, Civil War and Democratic Development

Nigeria achieved independence from the United Kingdom on 1 October 1960 as a federal state reflecting its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.

The early post-independence period was characterised by political instability culminating in military coups and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War. Although the conflict was primarily political and ethnic rather than religious, it significantly influenced national identity, federalism and state-building.

Subsequent decades alternated between military rule and civilian government before the restoration of constitutional democracy in 1999.

The 1999 Constitution established Nigeria as a secular federal republic while guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion. At the same time, several northern states subsequently expanded the application of Sharia within their legal systems, creating ongoing debates concerning the relationship between constitutional guarantees, religious law and federal authority.

These developments continue to shape contemporary discussions concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Contemporary Nigeria

Today, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and one of the world's most religiously diverse states. Islam predominates in much of the north, Christianity in much of the south, while indigenous religious traditions continue to influence cultural life across many communities.

This diversity has contributed to a vibrant religious landscape but has also generated complex legal, political and societal challenges. Regional differences in governance, competition over land and resources, demographic change, insurgent violence, communal conflict and constitutional debates all interact with religious identity in ways that influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Accordingly, contemporary Nigeria cannot be understood through a single explanatory framework. The country's FoRB environment reflects the cumulative effects of more than a thousand years of historical development, during which indigenous traditions, Islam, Christianity, colonial governance and modern federalism have each left enduring institutional and societal legacies.

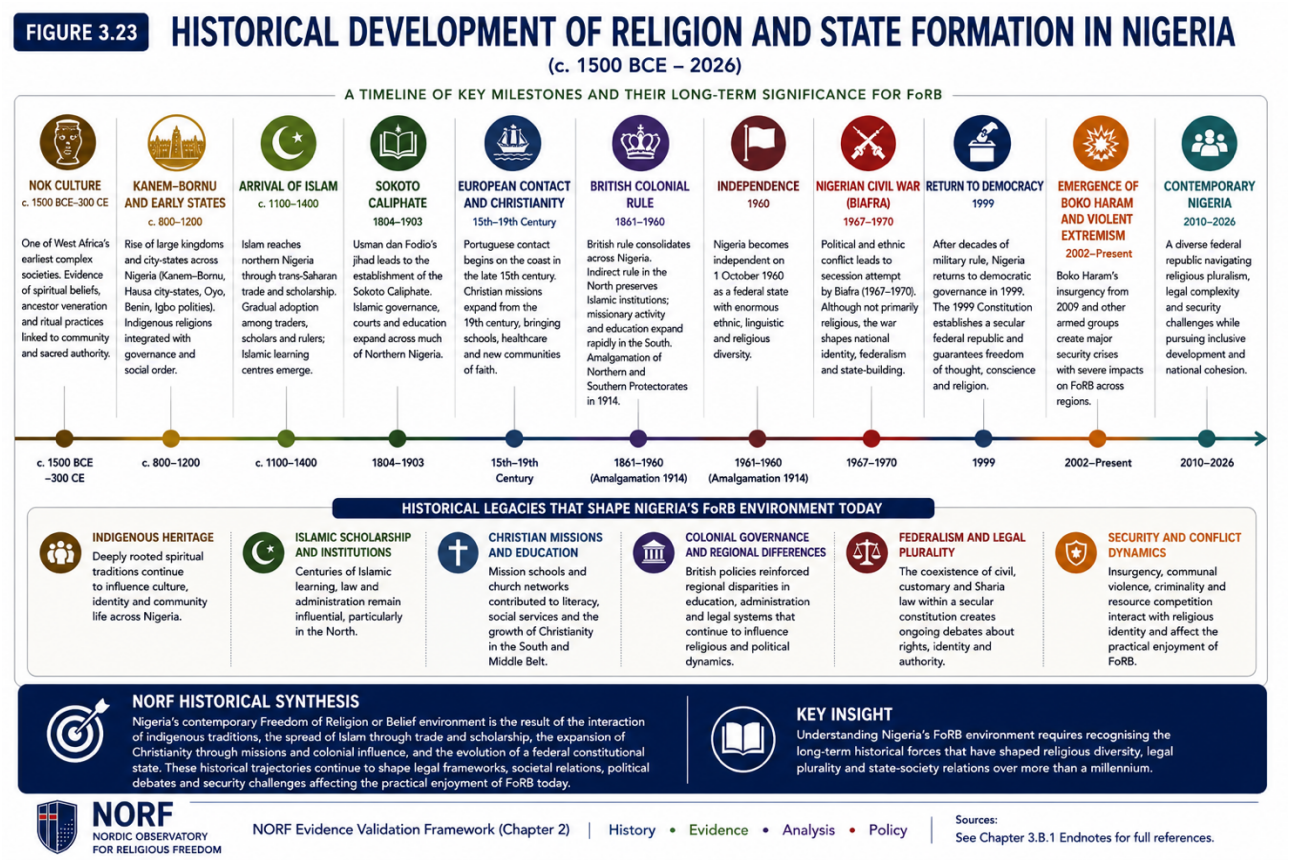
NORF Historical Assessment

The historical evidence demonstrates that Nigeria's contemporary religious landscape is the product of successive historical layers rather than a single transformative event. Indigenous religious traditions established enduring cultural foundations before the gradual spread of Islam through trans-Saharan trade and scholarship and the later expansion of Christianity through missionary activity and colonial administration.

British indirect rule institutionalised regional differences in governance, education and religious development, while post-independence federalism sought to accommodate this diversity within a single constitutional framework. These historical trajectories continue to influence legal institutions, political debates, religious demographics and patterns of intercommunal relations.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's current Freedom of Religion or Belief environment can only be understood through a long-term historical perspective integrating pre-colonial state formation, religious expansion, colonial governance and modern constitutional development. This historical continuity constitutes a foundational analytical framework for the subsequent assessment of legal structures, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions.

Fig. 3.23



3.B.2 Religious Landscape

Religious Diversity in a Federal and Multi-Ethnic State

Nigeria possesses one of the most religiously diverse societies in Africa. Unlike countries where a single religious tradition overwhelmingly predominates, Nigeria is characterised by the coexistence of large Muslim and Christian populations alongside enduring Indigenous religious traditions and smaller minority faith communities. Religion influences not only personal belief and worship but also education, healthcare, civil society, political mobilisation, customary governance and legal institutions. Consequently, religious affiliation constitutes an important dimension of both individual identity and public life.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) perspective, Nigeria's religious diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. The coexistence of multiple major religious communities has fostered a vibrant religious environment with extensive institutional development, yet it has also created areas of legal complexity, political contestation and communal tension. Understanding the country's religious landscape therefore requires an assessment that extends beyond demographic composition to examine the interaction between religion, society and the state.

Religious Demography

Nigeria has an estimated population exceeding 230 million people, making it Africa's most populous country. Religious affiliation is generally understood to be divided primarily between Islam and Christianity, with Indigenous religious traditions and smaller minority communities continuing to play an important role in the country's cultural and religious life.

Unlike many countries, Nigeria has not included questions on religious affiliation in recent national censuses. Consequently, no official government statistics exist regarding the precise religious composition of the population. Estimates therefore rely upon independent demographic research, household surveys and international institutions such as the Pew Research Center, the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), and academic demographic studies. While exact percentages differ between sources, there is broad agreement that Muslims and Christians each constitute approximately half of the national population, with Indigenous religions and other communities representing a much smaller proportion.

This absence of official census data requires careful interpretation of demographic estimates. NORF therefore applies an evidence-validation approach based upon triangulation of multiple independent sources rather than relying upon any single dataset.

The principal religious communities include:

- **Islam**, predominantly Sunni, with significant Sufi traditions, smaller Shi'a communities and reform-oriented Salafi movements.
- **Christianity**, comprising Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical, Pentecostal and numerous African Independent Churches.
- **Indigenous religions**, particularly among Yoruba, Igbo and Middle Belt communities, often existing alongside Christianity or Islam through varying forms of religious syncretism.
- Smaller religious communities including the Bahá'í Faith, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and non-religious individuals.

Although religious diversity is considerable, the relative balance between Muslims and Christians distinguishes Nigeria from most countries examined in FoRB assessments and contributes to a unique institutional and societal environment.

Evidence Note

Nigeria has not published official statistics on religious affiliation in recent population censuses. Demographic estimates presented throughout this report should therefore be understood as evidence-based approximations derived through triangulation of multiple independent research institutions rather than definitive government figures.

Geographical Distribution

Religious affiliation in Nigeria demonstrates pronounced regional variation, although these patterns are considerably more complex than the commonly used distinction between a "Muslim north" and a "Christian south."

Islam predominates across much of the northern states, reflecting centuries of Islamic scholarship, trans-Saharan trade and the historical influence of the Sokoto Caliphate and Kanem–Bornu Empire. Northern Nigeria contains numerous historic centres of Islamic education, including Kano, Katsina and Maiduguri.

Christianity predominates throughout much of southern Nigeria, where missionary expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established extensive church networks, educational institutions and healthcare services. Southern states contain substantial Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and rapidly growing Pentecostal communities.

Between these regions lies the **Middle Belt**, one of Nigeria's most religiously and ethnically diverse areas. Here, Muslim, Christian and Indigenous communities often live in close proximity. The Middle Belt has consequently become a focal point for many of Nigeria's most complex intercommunal conflicts, although these conflicts frequently involve multiple interacting factors including land use, political representation, ethnicity, climate-related resource pressures and local governance in addition to religion.

Rapid urbanisation has also altered traditional patterns of religious geography. Major metropolitan centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kaduna contain highly diverse populations where religious communities interact extensively in commerce, education and public administration.

Major Religious Communities

Islam

Islam has shaped northern Nigeria for nearly a millennium and continues to play a central role in religious, educational and social life. The overwhelming majority of Nigerian Muslims identify as Sunni, although religious practice encompasses considerable theological and organisational diversity.

Traditional Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the **Qadiriyya** and **Tijaniyya** orders, have historically exercised significant influence over Islamic scholarship and community leadership. Alongside these traditions, reform-oriented Salafi movements have expanded during recent decades, advocating different approaches to religious interpretation and practice.

Nigeria also contains one of Africa's largest Shi'a Muslim populations, represented primarily by the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), whose relationship with federal and state authorities has periodically generated legal and security concerns.

Islamic educational institutions, charitable organisations, religious courts operating within constitutionally recognised state-level jurisdictions and traditional religious authorities remain influential components of public life across many northern states.

Christianity

Christianity in Nigeria encompasses extraordinary institutional diversity. Historic denominations established during the colonial period continue to play prominent roles alongside rapidly expanding Pentecostal and Evangelical movements.

The Roman Catholic Church remains one of Nigeria's largest religious institutions and operates extensive educational, healthcare and humanitarian networks throughout the country. Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches likewise maintain longstanding institutional presence and contribute significantly to civil society.

Since the late twentieth century, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches have experienced remarkable growth, particularly within urban centres. These churches often emphasise evangelism, social engagement, youth participation and extensive media outreach. Several Nigerian Pentecostal organisations have also developed significant international influence through global missionary activity and diaspora communities.

Christian institutions collectively represent major providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social services across Nigeria.

Indigenous Religious Traditions

Indigenous religious traditions continue to form an important component of Nigeria's religious landscape despite the predominance of Islam and Christianity.

Traditional Yoruba religion, Igbo spiritual traditions and numerous Indigenous belief systems across the Middle Belt and southern regions remain integral to cultural identity, traditional authority and community life. Many practices involve reverence for ancestors, sacred natural sites, ritual specialists and belief in a supreme creator alongside spiritual intermediaries.

Religious syncretism is also common. Many Nigerians who identify as Christian or Muslim continue to participate in cultural practices rooted in Indigenous traditions, reflecting centuries of interaction between religious systems rather than strict replacement of earlier beliefs.

From a FoRB perspective, Indigenous religious communities warrant equal consideration alongside larger religious groups, consistent with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion or belief for all persons.

Religion and Society

Religion occupies a prominent position within Nigerian society and extends well beyond places of worship.

Faith-based organisations are among the country's largest providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and poverty alleviation. Churches, mosques and religious charities frequently supplement public services, particularly in underserved rural communities.

Religious leaders often exercise considerable influence within local communities and regularly participate in public debates concerning governance, ethics, education, family life and national development. Interfaith dialogue initiatives have likewise expanded over recent decades, particularly through organisations seeking to reduce communal tensions and strengthen peaceful coexistence.

At the same time, religious identity frequently intersects with ethnicity, regional identity, political competition and socio-economic conditions. Consequently, religion cannot be analysed in isolation from broader societal dynamics. Many incidents commonly characterised as purely religious conflict involve multiple overlapping drivers, including disputes concerning land, political representation, migration, resource competition and local governance.

Recognising these interacting factors represents a central component of the NORF analytical framework and avoids reducing complex social conflicts to religious affiliation alone.

Religion and the State

Nigeria's Constitution establishes the country as a secular federal republic while guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to change one's religion or belief and to manifest religion individually or collectively.

At the same time, Nigeria's federal system permits significant legal diversity among its thirty-six states. Since 1999, several northern states have expanded the application of Sharia to include aspects of criminal law for Muslims, while customary courts continue to operate in many parts of the country alongside statutory legal institutions. Traditional rulers likewise retain important advisory and cultural roles within many communities, often working alongside elected authorities and religious leaders. The interaction between constitutional guarantees, federalism, state-level legal diversity and traditional institutions creates one of the most complex governance environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief in Africa. These institutional arrangements are examined in greater detail in Section **3.B.4 Legal and Institutional Framework**.

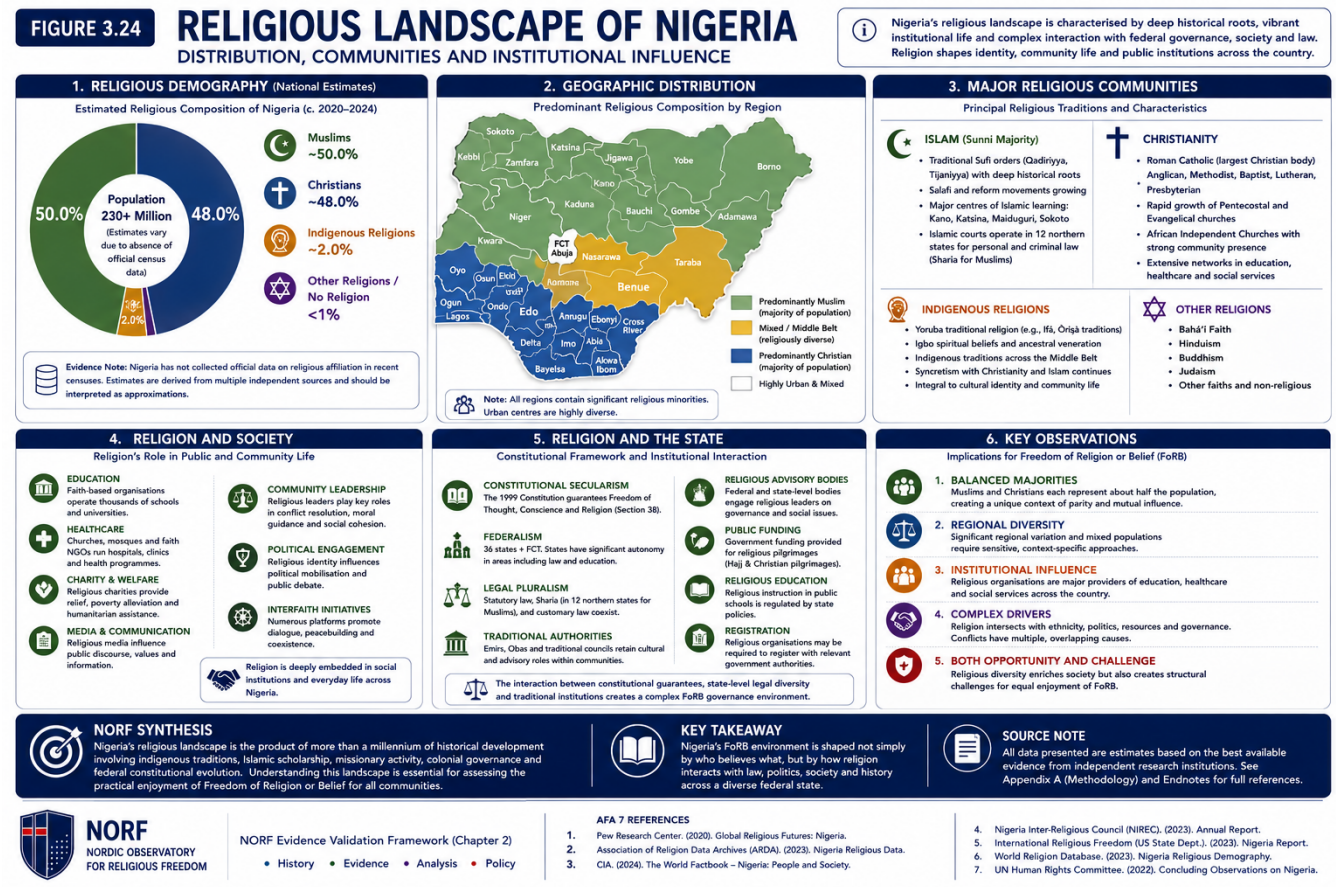
NORF Religious Landscape Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of the world's most institutionally developed and religiously diverse societies. Islam, Christianity and Indigenous religious traditions each contribute substantially to the country's cultural heritage, public institutions and community life. Religious organisations remain among Nigeria's most influential providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social support.

At the same time, religious diversity intersects with federalism, legal pluralism, ethnicity, demographic change and regional socio-economic disparities in ways that shape the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Consequently, religious affiliation alone rarely explains patterns of cooperation or conflict. A comprehensive FoRB assessment must instead consider the interaction between religious identity, constitutional structures, governance, historical development and local socio-political conditions.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's religious landscape should be understood not simply as a demographic distribution of faith communities, but as a complex institutional ecosystem in which religion functions simultaneously as a source of personal belief, communal identity, public service provision and political influence. This integrated understanding provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent assessment of legal frameworks, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions throughout the remainder of the Nigeria country assessment.

Figure 3.24. Religious Landscape of Nigeria: Distribution, Communities and Institutional Influence



3.B.3 Historical Drivers

Understanding the Historical Forces Shaping Contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria

The historical development of Nigeria has produced a religious landscape of exceptional diversity and institutional complexity. However, chronology alone does not explain the contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment. The NORF methodology therefore identifies the principal historical drivers that continue to influence religious coexistence, legal structures, political institutions and societal relations.

These drivers are not independent variables but interacting historical processes that have accumulated over centuries. Together they explain why contemporary Nigeria exhibits significant regional variation in legal systems, religious demographics, governance structures and security challenges.

The following analysis identifies six historical drivers that continue to shape Nigeria's FoRB environment.

Driver 1: The Independent Expansion of Islam and Christianity

Unlike many countries where one religious tradition largely replaced another, Nigeria experienced the expansion of Islam and Christianity through different historical pathways, geographical regions and periods.

Islam expanded gradually across northern Nigeria between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries through trans-Saharan trade, scholarship, diplomacy and later political consolidation under the Sokoto Caliphate. Christianity expanded primarily during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through missionary activity associated with European colonial administration, educational institutions and healthcare services concentrated in southern Nigeria.

Because these two major religious traditions developed largely independently rather than sequentially, Nigeria emerged as a society characterised by multiple well-established religious institutions with distinct historical identities rather than a dominant national religion.

This historical trajectory continues to influence regional religious demographics, educational institutions, legal traditions and public life.

NORF Observation

Nigeria's contemporary religious diversity reflects parallel historical development rather than religious replacement. This has created enduring institutional pluralism that distinguishes Nigeria from many other FoRB contexts.

Driver 2: British Colonial Indirect Rule

British colonial administration profoundly influenced Nigeria's constitutional and religious development through the policy of indirect rule.

Rather than replacing existing political structures, colonial authorities preserved many traditional institutions in northern Nigeria, including Islamic judicial systems and established emirates, while permitting comparatively limited Christian missionary expansion. In contrast, southern Nigeria experienced extensive missionary activity, rapid educational development and greater integration into colonial administrative structures.

Although intended to facilitate efficient governance, these differing administrative approaches reinforced regional disparities in education, legal development and religious institutional capacity.

The resulting asymmetries remain visible within contemporary debates concerning constitutional authority, legal pluralism and regional governance.

NORF Observation

Colonial governance institutionalised regional differences that continue to influence Nigeria's legal framework and practical implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Driver 3: Federalism and Legal Pluralism

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a federal constitutional system intended to accommodate its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.

Federalism allowed substantial autonomy for individual states while maintaining national constitutional guarantees. Since 1999, several northern states have expanded the application of Sharia law to aspects of criminal law for Muslims, while customary courts continue to operate in many parts of the country alongside statutory legal institutions.

Consequently, the practical experience of Freedom of Religion or Belief may vary across jurisdictions despite the existence of common constitutional protections.

Legal pluralism therefore represents one of the defining structural characteristics of Nigeria's FoRB environment.

NORF Observation

Federalism provides mechanisms for accommodating diversity while simultaneously creating regional variation in the practical implementation of constitutional rights.

Driver 4: Religion, Ethnicity and Political Identity

Religion in Nigeria cannot be understood independently of ethnicity and regional identity.

Many of the country's largest ethnic communities—including the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo—possess distinct historical religious trajectories. However, no simple relationship exists between ethnicity and religion. The Yoruba population, for example, includes substantial Muslim, Christian and Indigenous religious communities, while numerous minority ethnic groups demonstrate considerable internal religious diversity.

Political competition, electoral mobilisation and public discourse frequently involve overlapping religious, ethnic and regional identities. Consequently, religious affiliation may reinforce existing social identities without necessarily constituting the primary driver of political or communal disputes.

Recognising this interaction is essential for avoiding overly simplified explanations of complex societal dynamics.

NORF Observation

Religion frequently interacts with ethnicity and regional identity rather than functioning as an isolated explanatory factor.

Driver 5: Demographic Change and Urbanisation

Nigeria possesses one of the fastest-growing populations globally and continues to experience rapid urbanisation.

Large-scale internal migration has increased religious diversity within major cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt and Kaduna. Urban centres increasingly bring together populations with differing religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, creating new opportunities for cooperation while also generating pressures associated with housing, employment, political representation and access to public services.

Demographic growth also affects education, land use, infrastructure and local governance, factors that may indirectly influence Freedom of Religion or Belief where resource competition intersects with communal identity.

NORF emphasises that demographic change should not be interpreted as a cause of religious conflict in itself but as a structural factor capable of influencing broader social dynamics.

NORF Observation

Rapid demographic transformation increases the importance of inclusive governance capable of managing religious diversity within expanding urban environments.

Driver 6: Insurgency, Insecurity and State Capacity

Since the early twenty-first century, armed insurgency and widespread insecurity have become major factors affecting the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief in several regions of Nigeria.

Groups including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have deliberately targeted civilians, religious leaders, places of worship, educational institutions and humanitarian organisations. At the same time, communal violence, criminal banditry, farmer-herder conflicts and other forms of insecurity have created complex protection challenges affecting multiple religious communities.

The interaction between insecurity and uneven state capacity has significant implications for FoRB. Where government institutions struggle to provide effective protection, communities may experience reduced access to education, religious practice, humanitarian assistance and justice.

Importantly, NORF distinguishes between ideologically motivated religious violence and violence arising primarily from criminal, political or resource-related drivers, recognising that these categories frequently overlap but should not automatically be conflated.

NORF Observation

The principal contemporary challenge to Freedom of Religion or Belief in many parts of Nigeria arises not solely from religious difference, but from the interaction between insecurity, governance capacity and multiple overlapping conflict drivers.

Integrated NORF Assessment

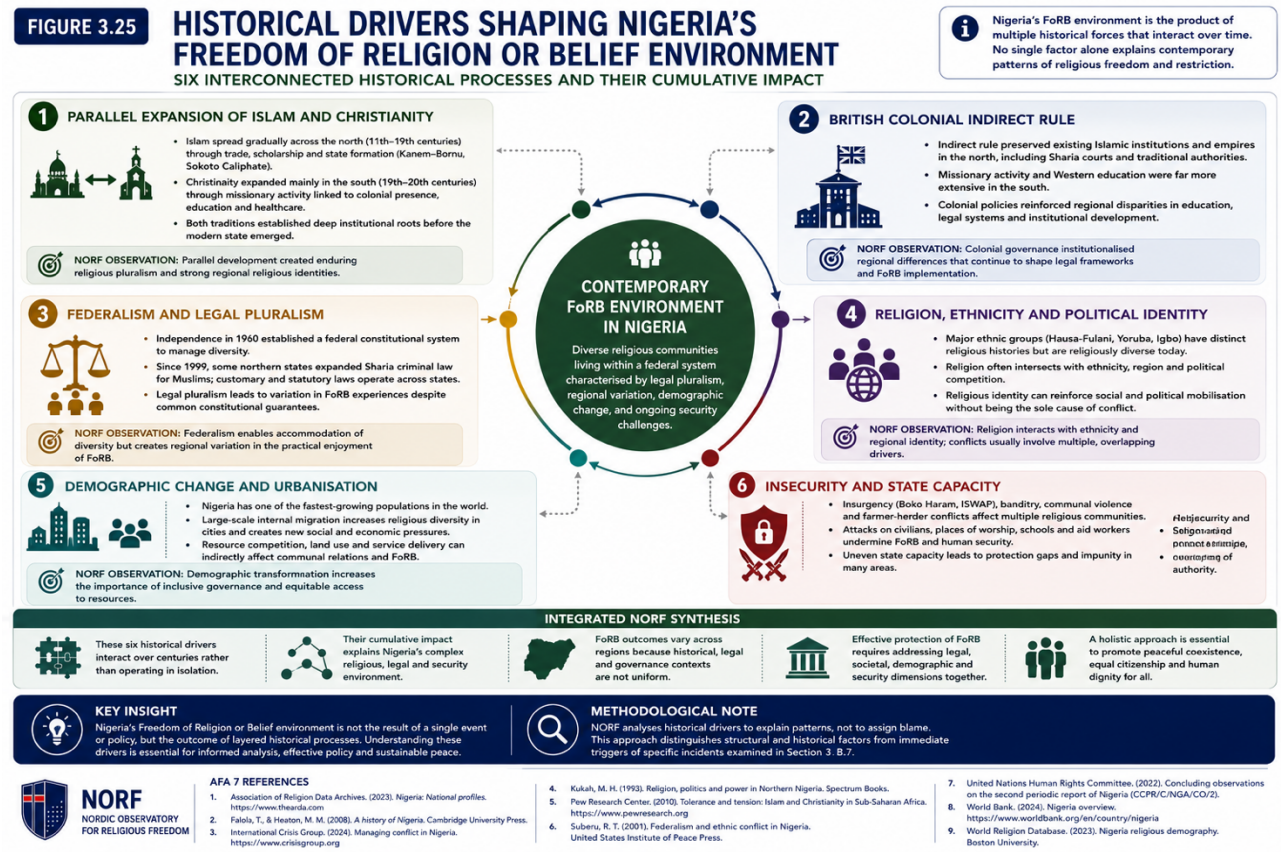
The historical evidence demonstrates that Nigeria's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment has been shaped by six interrelated historical drivers: the independent expansion of Islam and Christianity; British colonial indirect rule; federalism and legal pluralism; the interaction of religion with ethnicity and regional identity; rapid demographic transformation; and the emergence of prolonged insecurity in parts of the country.

No single driver adequately explains Nigeria's contemporary FoRB landscape. Rather, the country's institutional complexity reflects the cumulative interaction of historical, constitutional, demographic and security-related developments over more than a millennium.

From a methodological perspective, these drivers provide the analytical bridge between Nigeria's historical development and the empirical assessment presented in subsequent chapters. They explain why constitutional guarantees, legal implementation, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions vary across regions while remaining embedded within a common federal framework.

NORF therefore concludes that contemporary FoRB challenges in Nigeria should be understood as the product of interacting historical processes rather than isolated contemporary events. This historical perspective provides the essential analytical foundation for the legal, governmental, societal and security assessments that follow.

Figure 3.25. Historical Drivers Shaping Nigeria's Freedom of Religion or Belief Environment



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3.B.4 Legal and Institutional Framework

The Constitutional and Legal Framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The legal framework governing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Nigeria is characterised by constitutional guarantees, federal legal pluralism and the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This institutional complexity reflects Nigeria's historical development as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federal republic and represents one of the defining characteristics of its governance structure.

From a FoRB perspective, the existence of multiple legal systems does not, in itself, constitute a restriction on religious freedom. Rather, the practical enjoyment of FoRB depends upon the interaction between constitutional protections, legislative frameworks, judicial independence and administrative implementation across Nigeria's thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **legal guarantees** (the normative framework established by law) and **government practice** (the practical implementation of those guarantees), which is examined in Section **3.B.5**.

Constitutional Guarantees

The **Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended)** provides the principal legal foundation for the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Section 38 guarantees every individual:

- freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- freedom to change religion or belief;
- freedom to manifest religion individually or collectively;
- freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe religion.

These protections broadly reflect the standards established under **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, to which Nigeria is a State Party.

The Constitution also prohibits the adoption of a state religion by the federal government or by individual states under **Section 10**, thereby establishing Nigeria as a constitutionally secular state despite its deeply religious society.

In addition, constitutional protections relating to equality before the law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and protection from discrimination reinforce the broader legal environment supporting FoRB.

NORF Observation

Nigeria's constitutional framework provides comprehensive formal protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief that is broadly consistent with international human rights standards.

Federalism and Legal Pluralism

Nigeria's federal structure permits considerable legislative autonomy at the state level while maintaining constitutional supremacy.

This has resulted in the coexistence of three principal legal systems:

- statutory law;
- customary law;
- Islamic (Sharia) law.

Customary courts continue to operate in many parts of Nigeria, particularly concerning family law, inheritance and traditional community matters.
Islamic courts similarly exercise jurisdiction within states that have established Sharia legal systems, primarily regarding personal status matters for Muslims.
Since 1999, twelve northern states have expanded the application of Sharia beyond personal status to include aspects of criminal law applicable to Muslims.
This legal pluralism reflects Nigeria's constitutional accommodation of cultural and religious diversity but also contributes to significant regional variation in legal practice.

NORF Observation

Legal pluralism represents an institutional feature of Nigeria's constitutional order rather than an exception to it. The principal FoRB question is therefore how these parallel legal systems operate in practice and whether they provide equal protection consistent with constitutional and international standards.

Sharia within the Constitutional Framework

The expansion of Sharia criminal law in several northern states has generated considerable domestic and international discussion concerning its compatibility with constitutional protections and international human rights obligations.

Under Nigeria's constitutional framework, Sharia courts exercise jurisdiction primarily over Muslims who voluntarily fall within their competence. In practice, however, questions have periodically arisen regarding procedural safeguards, equal protection, freedom of conversion, gender equality and the practical interaction between Sharia, statutory courts and constitutional rights.

Judicial review by higher courts provides an important constitutional mechanism for resolving conflicts between state legislation and constitutional guarantees.

The legal existence of Sharia should therefore be distinguished from questions concerning its implementation, judicial oversight and consistency with human rights obligations.

NORF Observation

The presence of Sharia courts does not automatically determine the level of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Assessment requires examination of jurisdiction, procedural safeguards, constitutional review and practical implementation.

International Human Rights Commitments

Nigeria has ratified numerous international and regional human rights instruments relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (as a UN member state);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR);
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

These instruments oblige Nigeria to protect freedom of religion, equality before the law, non-discrimination and related civil liberties.
Implementation of treaty obligations, however, depends upon domestic legislation, judicial interpretation, institutional capacity and administrative practice.

NORF Observation

Nigeria demonstrates broad formal commitment to international human rights law, although implementation remains uneven across sectors and jurisdictions.

Institutions Relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Protection of FoRB involves multiple governmental and judicial institutions.

These include:

- the Federal Government;
- the National Assembly;
- state governments;
- federal and state courts;
- Sharia Courts of Appeal;
- Customary Courts of Appeal;
- the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC);
- law enforcement agencies;
- state justice ministries.

Religious organisations themselves also interact extensively with public authorities through advisory councils, educational institutions, humanitarian activities and civil society initiatives. The effectiveness of these institutions varies considerably depending upon resources, regional capacity and security conditions.

Legal Challenges

Despite comprehensive constitutional protections, several legal challenges continue to influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

These include:

- differing implementation of constitutional guarantees across states;
- legal uncertainty arising from overlapping jurisdictions;
- procedural differences between statutory and religious courts;
- unequal institutional capacity;
- delays within the judicial system;
- challenges associated with insecurity affecting access to justice.

These issues do not necessarily indicate deficiencies within the constitutional framework itself but rather illustrate the complexity of implementing constitutional rights across a large federal state characterised by significant regional diversity.

Integrated NORF Legal Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of Africa's most comprehensive constitutional frameworks for protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. Constitutional guarantees broadly reflect international human rights standards and establish a legal foundation supporting religious freedom, equality and non-discrimination.

At the same time, Nigeria's federal constitutional structure permits substantial legal diversity through the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This legal pluralism represents a defining institutional characteristic rather than an inherent restriction on FoRB. Nevertheless, regional variation in legislation, institutional capacity and judicial practice may influence how constitutional guarantees are experienced by individuals and communities.

NORF therefore concludes that the principal analytical challenge lies not in identifying constitutional protections, but in assessing the consistency with which those protections are implemented across different jurisdictions. Accordingly, the legal framework should be understood as providing the normative baseline against which subsequent evaluation of government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions can be measured.

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3.B.4 Legal and Institutional Framework

The Constitutional and Legal Framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The legal framework governing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Nigeria is characterised by constitutional guarantees, federal legal pluralism and the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This institutional complexity reflects Nigeria's historical development as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federal republic and represents one of the defining characteristics of its governance structure.

From a FoRB perspective, the existence of multiple legal systems does not, in itself, constitute a restriction on religious freedom. Rather, the practical enjoyment of FoRB depends upon the interaction between constitutional protections, legislative frameworks, judicial independence and administrative implementation across Nigeria's thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **legal guarantees** (the normative framework established by law) and **government practice** (the practical implementation of those guarantees), which is examined in Section **3.B.5**.

Constitutional Guarantees

The **Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended)** provides the principal legal foundation for the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Section 38 guarantees every individual:

- freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- freedom to change religion or belief;
- freedom to manifest religion individually or collectively;
- freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe religion.

These protections broadly reflect the standards established under **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, to which Nigeria is a State Party.

The Constitution also prohibits the adoption of a state religion by the federal government or by individual states under **Section 10**, thereby establishing Nigeria as a constitutionally secular state despite its deeply religious society.

In addition, constitutional protections relating to equality before the law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and protection from discrimination reinforce the broader legal environment supporting FoRB.

NORF Observation

Nigeria's constitutional framework provides comprehensive formal protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief that is broadly consistent with international human rights standards.

Federalism and Legal Pluralism

Nigeria's federal structure permits considerable legislative autonomy at the state level while maintaining constitutional supremacy.

This has resulted in the coexistence of three principal legal systems:

- statutory law;
- customary law;
- Islamic (Sharia) law.

Customary courts continue to operate in many parts of Nigeria, particularly concerning family law, inheritance and traditional community matters.
Islamic courts similarly exercise jurisdiction within states that have established Sharia legal systems, primarily regarding personal status matters for Muslims.
Since 1999, twelve northern states have expanded the application of Sharia beyond personal status to include aspects of criminal law applicable to Muslims.
This legal pluralism reflects Nigeria's constitutional accommodation of cultural and religious diversity but also contributes to significant regional variation in legal practice.

NORF Observation

Legal pluralism represents an institutional feature of Nigeria's constitutional order rather than an exception to it. The principal FoRB question is therefore how these parallel legal systems operate in

practice and whether they provide equal protection consistent with constitutional and international standards.

Sharia within the Constitutional Framework

The expansion of Sharia criminal law in several northern states has generated considerable domestic and international discussion concerning its compatibility with constitutional protections and international human rights obligations.

Under Nigeria's constitutional framework, Sharia courts exercise jurisdiction primarily over Muslims who voluntarily fall within their competence. In practice, however, questions have periodically arisen regarding procedural safeguards, equal protection, freedom of conversion, gender equality and the practical interaction between Sharia, statutory courts and constitutional rights.

Judicial review by higher courts provides an important constitutional mechanism for resolving conflicts between state legislation and constitutional guarantees.

The legal existence of Sharia should therefore be distinguished from questions concerning its implementation, judicial oversight and consistency with human rights obligations.

NORF Observation

The presence of Sharia courts does not automatically determine the level of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Assessment requires examination of jurisdiction, procedural safeguards, constitutional review and practical implementation.

International Human Rights Commitments

Nigeria has ratified numerous international and regional human rights instruments relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (as a UN member state);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR);
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

These instruments oblige Nigeria to protect freedom of religion, equality before the law, non-discrimination and related civil liberties.
Implementation of treaty obligations, however, depends upon domestic legislation, judicial interpretation, institutional capacity and administrative practice.

NORF Observation

Nigeria demonstrates broad formal commitment to international human rights law, although implementation remains uneven across sectors and jurisdictions.

Institutions Relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Protection of FoRB involves multiple governmental and judicial institutions.

These include:

- the Federal Government;
- the National Assembly;
- state governments;
- federal and state courts;
- Sharia Courts of Appeal;
- Customary Courts of Appeal;
- the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC);
- law enforcement agencies;
- state justice ministries.

Religious organisations themselves also interact extensively with public authorities through advisory councils, educational institutions, humanitarian activities and civil society initiatives. The effectiveness of these institutions varies considerably depending upon resources, regional capacity and security conditions.

Legal Challenges

Despite comprehensive constitutional protections, several legal challenges continue to influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

These include:

- differing implementation of constitutional guarantees across states;
- legal uncertainty arising from overlapping jurisdictions;
- procedural differences between statutory and religious courts;
- unequal institutional capacity;
- delays within the judicial system;
- challenges associated with insecurity affecting access to justice.

These issues do not necessarily indicate deficiencies within the constitutional framework itself but rather illustrate the complexity of implementing constitutional rights across a large federal state characterised by significant regional diversity.

Integrated NORF Legal Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of Africa's most comprehensive constitutional frameworks for protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. Constitutional guarantees broadly reflect international human rights standards and establish a legal foundation supporting religious freedom, equality and non-discrimination.

At the same time, Nigeria's federal constitutional structure permits substantial legal diversity through the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This legal pluralism represents a defining institutional characteristic rather than an inherent restriction on FoRB. Nevertheless, regional variation in legislation, institutional capacity and judicial practice may influence how constitutional guarantees are experienced by individuals and communities.

NORF therefore concludes that the principal analytical challenge lies not in identifying constitutional protections, but in assessing the consistency with which those protections are implemented across different jurisdictions. Accordingly, the legal framework should be understood as providing the normative baseline against which subsequent evaluation of government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions can be measured.

Figure 3.26

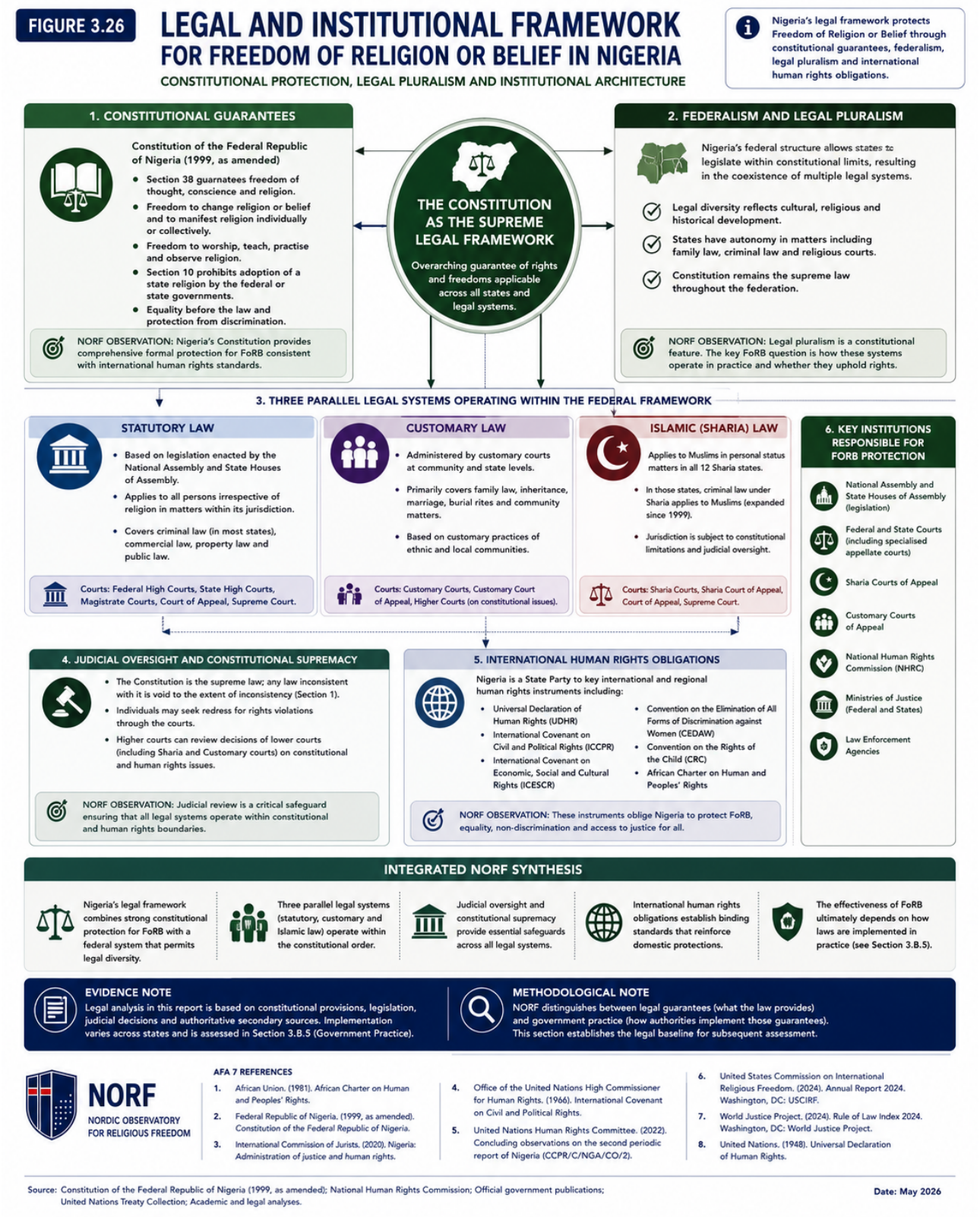
FIGURE 3.26
LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN NIGERIA
CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION, LEGAL PLURALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE
Nigeria's legal framework protects Freedom of Religion or Belief through constitutional guarantees, federalism, legal pluralism and international human rights obligations.
1. CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES
Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended)
Section 38 guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
Freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest religion individually or collectively.
Freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe religion.
Section 10 prohibits adoption of a state religion by the federal or state governments.
Equality before the law and protection from discrimination.
NORF OBSERVATION: Nigeria's Constitution provides comprehensive formal protection for FoRB consistent with international human rights standards.
THE CONSTITUTION AS THE SUPREME LEGAL FRAMEWORK
Overarching guarantee of rights and freedoms applicable across all states and legal systems.
2. FEDERALISM AND LEGAL PLURALISM
Nigeria's federal structure allows states to legislate within constitutional limits, resulting in the coexistence of multiple legal systems.
Legal diversity reflects cultural, religious and historical development.
States have autonomy in matters including family law, criminal law and religious courts.
Constitution remains the supreme law throughout the federation.
NORF OBSERVATION: Legal pluralism is a constitutional feature. The key FoRB question is how these systems operate in practice and whether they uphold rights.
3. THREE PARALLEL LEGAL SYSTEMS OPERATING WITHIN THE FEDERAL FRAMEWORK
STATUTORY LAW
Based on legislation enacted by the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly.
Applies to all persons irrespective of religion in matters within its jurisdiction.
Covers criminal law (in most states), commercial law, property law and public law.
Courts: Federal High Courts, State High Courts, Magistrate Courts, Court of Appeal, Supreme Court.
CUSTOMARY LAW
Administered by customary courts at community and state levels.
Primarily covers family law, inheritance, marriage, burial rites and community matters.
Based on customary practices of ethnic and local communities.
Courts: Customary Courts, Customary Court of Appeal, Higher Courts (on constitutional issues).
ISLAMIC (SHARIA) LAW
Applies to Muslims in personal status matters in all 12 Sharia states.
In those states, criminal law under Sharia applies to Muslims (expanded since 1999).
Jurisdiction is subject to constitutional limitations and judicial oversight.
Courts: Sharia Courts, Sharia Court of Appeal, Court of Appeal, Supreme Court.
4. JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT AND CONSTITUTIONAL SUPREMACY
The Constitution is the supreme law; any law inconsistent with it is void to the extent of inconsistency (Section 1).
Individuals may seek redress for rights violations through the courts.
Higher courts can review decisions of lower courts (including Sharia and Customary courts) on constitutional and human rights issues.
NORF OBSERVATION: Judicial review is a critical safeguard ensuring that all legal systems operate within constitutional and human rights boundaries.
5. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS
Nigeria is a State Party to key international and regional human rights instruments including:
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
NORF OBSERVATION: These instruments oblige Nigeria to protect FoRB, equality, non-discrimination and access to justice for all.
6. KEY INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR FORB PROTECTION
National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly (legislation)
Federal and State Courts (including specialised appellate courts)
Sharia Courts of Appeal
Customary Courts of Appeal
National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)
Ministries of Justice (Federal and States)
Law Enforcement Agencies
INTEGRATED NORF SYNTHESIS
Nigeria's legal framework combines strong constitutional protection for FoRB with a federal system that permits legal diversity.
Three parallel legal systems (statutory, customary and Islamic law) operate within the constitutional order.
Judicial oversight and constitutional supremacy provide essential safeguards across all legal systems.
International human rights obligations establish binding standards that reinforce domestic protections.
The effectiveness of FoRB ultimately depends on how laws are implemented in practice (see Section 3.B.5).
EVIDENCE NOTE
Legal analysis in this report is based on constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions and authoritative secondary sources. Implementation varies across states and is assessed in Section 3.B.5 (Government Practice).
METHODOLOGICAL NOTE
NORF distinguishes between legal guarantees (what the law provides) and government practice (how authorities implement those guarantees). This section establishes the legal baseline for subsequent assessment.
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
AFA 7 REFERENCES
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Date: May 2026

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3.B.5 Government Practice

Implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief

From Legal Protection to Practical Implementation

While Nigeria's Constitution establishes comprehensive protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the practical enjoyment of these rights depends upon how public authorities implement constitutional guarantees across the country's diverse federal system. Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **legal protections** and **government practice**, recognising that the existence of constitutional rights does not automatically ensure their effective implementation.

Government practice encompasses the actions of public institutions responsible for protecting constitutional rights, maintaining public order, administering justice and ensuring equal treatment before the law. These include the Federal Government, state governments, law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions and regulatory authorities.

Assessment under this section therefore focuses not on individual incidents but on institutional patterns that influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Constitutional Implementation

Federal authorities generally recognise the constitutional protection of religious freedom and publicly affirm Nigeria's commitment to religious diversity and equality before the law. Religious organisations representing Islam, Christianity and other faith communities operate openly throughout much of the country and participate extensively in public life.

At the same time, implementation varies considerably between federal, state and local authorities. Administrative capacity, regional security conditions, political priorities and institutional resources all influence the consistency with which constitutional guarantees are realised in practice.
The federal system grants substantial authority to state governments, resulting in differing approaches to religious administration, education, dispute resolution and public order.

NORF Observation

Nigeria demonstrates broad constitutional recognition of Freedom of Religion or Belief; however, implementation is not uniform across jurisdictions.

Administration of Religious Affairs

Nigeria does not maintain a single national ministry responsible for religious affairs. Instead, responsibility is distributed among federal institutions, state governments and independent regulatory bodies.

Religious organisations generally enjoy the ability to establish places of worship, educational institutions, charitable organisations and humanitarian programmes. Registration requirements primarily relate to legal incorporation, taxation and governance rather than approval of religious doctrine.

Government authorities also cooperate with religious institutions in areas including:

- education;
- healthcare;
- humanitarian assistance;
- disaster response;
- public health campaigns;
- community mediation.

This cooperation reflects the significant role played by faith-based organisations in providing public services throughout Nigeria.

NORF Observation

Government interaction with religious organisations is generally characterised by institutional cooperation rather than direct administrative control.

Judicial Protection and Access to Justice

Nigeria's judiciary represents an important mechanism for protecting constitutional rights relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Individuals may challenge governmental actions through the courts where constitutional rights are alleged to have been violated. Higher courts possess authority to review decisions of lower courts and assess the constitutionality of legislation and administrative actions.

In practice, however, access to justice varies across regions due to:

- judicial capacity;
- procedural delays;
- financial constraints;
- geographical accessibility;
- security conditions.

These factors may affect the timely resolution of cases involving constitutional rights, including matters relating to religious freedom.

NORF Observation

Judicial review provides an important constitutional safeguard, although practical access to effective remedies varies across the federation.

Law Enforcement and Protection of Religious Communities

Law enforcement agencies bear primary responsibility for protecting individuals and religious communities from violence, intimidation and criminal activity.

The effectiveness of policing differs considerably across Nigeria. In many urban areas, police institutions provide routine protection for religious gatherings, major public events and places of worship. However, in several conflict-affected regions, particularly parts of the North East and North West, security institutions continue to face significant operational challenges arising from insurgency, organised crime and communal violence.

Government responses to attacks against religious communities have generally included military operations against insurgent organisations, increased deployment of security personnel and collaboration with local authorities. Nevertheless, concerns have periodically been raised by domestic and international observers regarding the consistency, effectiveness and timeliness of protective measures in some areas.

The NORF methodology emphasises that evaluation of government practice should focus upon institutional capacity and operational effectiveness rather than attributing responsibility solely on the basis of individual incidents.

NORF Observation

Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief is closely linked to broader state capacity. Security challenges in some regions affect the state's ability to provide equal protection for all religious communities.

Public Administration and Religious Neutrality

Nigeria's constitutional framework requires public institutions to maintain neutrality regarding religion while respecting the country's religious diversity.

In practice, public authorities regularly engage with religious leaders during national ceremonies, conflict mediation initiatives and policy consultations. Government support for religious pilgrimages, including administrative assistance for both the Hajj and Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, reflects longstanding public policy intended to ensure equal treatment of the country's two largest religious communities.

At the same time, debates continue regarding the appropriate relationship between religion and public institutions, particularly concerning religious education, public funding and symbolic representation.

These issues illustrate the ongoing balance between constitutional neutrality and recognition of religion's prominent role within Nigerian society.

NORF Observation

Government practice generally seeks to accommodate major religious communities while maintaining constitutional neutrality, although implementation remains subject to political and regional variation.

Institutional Capacity

The effectiveness of governmental protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief depends significantly upon institutional capacity.

Several structural factors influence implementation, including:

- administrative resources;
- judicial efficiency;
- law enforcement capability;
- coordination between federal and state authorities;
- availability of trained personnel;
- security conditions.

In regions experiencing prolonged insecurity, institutional capacity is frequently constrained, reducing the state's ability to prevent violence, investigate offences and ensure accountability. Conversely, in many stable regions, governmental institutions function effectively and religious communities exercise constitutional freedoms with comparatively limited interference.

NORF Observation

Variation in institutional capacity represents one of the principal factors influencing the practical implementation of constitutional guarantees across Nigeria.

Evidence-Based Assessment of Government Practice

Assessment of government practice requires distinguishing between isolated administrative shortcomings and broader institutional patterns.

The available evidence indicates that Nigeria possesses functioning constitutional institutions committed to protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. However, implementation is influenced by regional disparities in governance capacity, security conditions and judicial effectiveness.

Importantly, most documented challenges relate to uneven implementation rather than systematic national policies restricting religious freedom. This distinction is essential for an accurate assessment of Nigeria's FoRB environment.

Integrated NORF Assessment

Government practice in Nigeria demonstrates a mixed but institutionally functioning implementation of constitutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Federal authorities formally recognise religious freedom, public institutions generally cooperate with diverse religious communities and constitutional mechanisms exist for judicial review and legal redress.

Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven across Nigeria's federal system. Institutional capacity, regional insecurity, administrative resources and local governance conditions influence the consistency with which constitutional guarantees are realised in practice. These variations should not be interpreted as evidence of a uniform national policy but rather as reflecting the operational challenges associated with governing a large, religiously diverse federation facing significant security pressures.

NORF therefore concludes that the principal governmental challenge is strengthening the consistent implementation of existing constitutional protections across all jurisdictions. The legal framework provides a robust normative foundation; however, its practical effectiveness ultimately depends upon institutional capacity, accountability and equal access to justice.

Figure 3.27

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3.B.6 Societal Environment

Societal Conditions Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Freedom of Religion or Belief is shaped not only by constitutional protections and government practice but also by the attitudes, institutions and interactions that exist within society. In Nigeria, religious communities coexist within one of Africa's most diverse social environments, characterised by significant regional variation, ethnic diversity, rapid urbanisation and extensive participation of religious institutions in public life.

The NORF methodology therefore distinguishes societal conditions from governmental action. While governments establish legal frameworks and public policy, society influences the practical exercise of religious freedom through community relations, education, economic participation, civil society, media, traditional institutions and everyday interaction between religious communities.

Accordingly, this section evaluates the societal environment affecting FoRB without conflating societal dynamics with government responsibility or violent conflict.

Interreligious Relations

Relations between Nigeria's religious communities are highly diverse and cannot be characterised by a single national pattern.

Across much of the country, Muslims, Christians and adherents of Indigenous religions interact peacefully through shared markets, educational institutions, workplaces and local governance structures. Numerous interfaith organisations promote dialogue, conflict mediation and community cooperation, particularly in urban centres and areas with longstanding religious diversity.

At the same time, local tensions periodically emerge where religious identity intersects with political competition, historical grievances, land ownership, migration or resource allocation. Such tensions vary significantly between regions and should not be interpreted as evidence of nationwide interreligious hostility.

The available evidence indicates that patterns of coexistence substantially outnumber episodes of organised communal confrontation, although the latter often receive disproportionate international attention because of their severity.

NORF Observation

The societal environment in Nigeria is characterised by extensive everyday interreligious coexistence alongside geographically concentrated areas of recurring tension.

Religion and Community Life

Religious institutions occupy a central position within Nigerian society.

Churches, mosques and Indigenous religious communities function not only as places of worship but also as providers of:

- education;
- healthcare;
- humanitarian assistance;
- social welfare;
- vocational training;
- youth programmes;
- disaster relief;
- mediation and reconciliation.

Faith-based organisations therefore contribute significantly to community resilience and local development.
Religious leaders frequently hold positions of considerable public trust and often participate in mediation efforts during periods of political instability or communal tension.

NORF Observation

Religious communities represent major components of Nigerian civil society and contribute substantially to social cohesion and public service delivery.

Education and Religious Formation

Education plays a significant role in shaping long-term societal attitudes towards religious diversity.

Nigeria's educational landscape includes:

- public schools;
- mission schools;
- Islamic schools;
- Qur'anic schools;
- private religious institutions;
- universities operated by religious organisations.

These institutions collectively educate millions of Nigerians each year.

Educational curricula generally include religious studies, although implementation varies between states and educational systems.

Interfaith educational initiatives have expanded in several regions, while civil society organisations continue to promote tolerance, citizenship and peaceful coexistence through educational programmes.

NORF Observation

Education represents both an opportunity for strengthening interreligious understanding and an important area requiring continued attention to ensure inclusive approaches consistent with constitutional principles.

Media and Public Discourse

Traditional media, digital media and social media increasingly shape public discussion concerning religion in Nigeria.

Religious organisations maintain extensive media networks through television, radio, print publications and online platforms. These networks play an important role in religious education, public communication and humanitarian outreach.

At the same time, digital platforms may contribute to the rapid dissemination of misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric or unverified reports during periods of communal tension.

The societal impact of media therefore depends upon responsible journalism, effective communication by community leaders and public confidence in reliable sources of information.

NORF Observation

Media serve both as an important platform for religious expression and as a potential amplifier of societal tensions when inaccurate information circulates during periods of insecurity.

Social Inclusion and Equal Participation

Freedom of Religion or Belief includes the ability of individuals and communities to participate equally in public life regardless of religious affiliation.
The available evidence indicates that religious organisations from multiple traditions actively participate in Nigerian society through business, education, healthcare, civil society and humanitarian activities.
Nevertheless, perceptions of unequal representation or unequal access to political influence occasionally arise within local contexts, particularly where religion intersects with ethnicity, regional identity or electoral competition.
NORF emphasises that these issues should be analysed within their specific political and historical contexts rather than interpreted solely through a religious lens.

NORF Observation

The principal societal challenges affecting FoRB frequently arise where religious identity intersects with broader questions of representation, governance and social inclusion.

Traditional Institutions and Community Leadership

Traditional rulers continue to play an influential role throughout many parts of Nigeria.

Emirs, Obas, Obis and numerous local traditional authorities frequently cooperate with elected officials, religious leaders and civil society organisations in conflict prevention, customary dispute resolution and community development.

These traditional institutions often facilitate dialogue between religious communities and contribute to local stability.

Their influence varies considerably across regions but remains an important component of Nigeria's societal governance landscape.

NORF Observation

Traditional institutions continue to provide locally legitimate mechanisms for dialogue and conflict prevention alongside formal governmental institutions.

Societal Resilience

Despite periodic episodes of communal violence and insecurity, Nigerian society demonstrates considerable resilience.
Across much of the country, religious communities cooperate in commerce, education, humanitarian assistance and neighbourhood life.
Interfaith organisations, women's groups, youth initiatives and community leaders frequently engage in peacebuilding efforts designed to reduce tensions before they escalate.
These societal mechanisms represent important protective factors supporting the long-term enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

NORF Observation

Evidence indicates that local resilience and interfaith cooperation remain significant strengths within Nigerian society and should be recognised alongside documented challenges.

Integrated NORF Assessment

Nigeria's societal environment presents a complex but generally resilient context for the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Religious institutions are deeply embedded within community life and make substantial contributions to education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social cohesion. Across much of the country, everyday interaction between Muslims, Christians and adherents of Indigenous religions is characterised by cooperation rather than confrontation.

At the same time, societal dynamics are influenced by historical grievances, demographic change, political competition, economic inequality and regional diversity. Religious identity frequently interacts with these broader factors, making it difficult to attribute social tensions to religion alone. This complexity underscores the importance of analysing societal conditions within their wider political, economic and cultural contexts.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's societal environment contains both significant strengths and persistent vulnerabilities. Interfaith cooperation, strong religious institutions and active civil society provide substantial foundations for peaceful coexistence, while localised tensions demonstrate the continuing need for inclusive governance, dialogue and equal participation. Importantly, the available evidence suggests that societal relations should not be assessed solely through episodes of conflict but through the broader pattern of everyday coexistence that characterises much of Nigerian society.

Figure 3.28

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3.B.7 Violence, Intimidation and Security

Empirical Patterns Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Violence is one of the most serious constraints on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria. Its scale is substantial: Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 deaths in violent incidents during 2024**, compared with 11,869 in 2023. Approximately **75% of recorded fatalities occurred in northern Nigeria**. The highest absolute totals were reported in Borno State, with 1,263 deaths, followed by Katsina with 1,130, Zamfara with 1,126, Kaduna with 1,078 and Niger with 943. (nigeriawatch.org)

These national totals must not be interpreted as religious-persecution figures. They include insurgency, banditry, criminal violence, counter-insurgency operations, communal disputes and other forms of lethal violence. Establishing the FoRB component requires a second analytical stage: identifying whether victims, institutions or communities were targeted because of religion, or whether wider insecurity materially prevented religious practice.

NORF therefore applies the following sequence:

3.B.7.1 Empirical Baseline

Selected indicators

Indicator	Period	Recorded value	Interpretation
Deaths in violent incidents nationwide	2024	**12,162**	All recorded lethal violence; not a FoRB-only total
Increase from previous year	2023–2024	**2.5%**	From 11,869 to 12,162
Share occurring in northern Nigeria	2024	**~75%**	Demonstrates strong geographic concentration
Deaths attributed to crime	2024	**6,018**	Banditry and criminal violence were major components
Boko Haram/ISWAP/Ansaru violence and related counter-operations	2024	**1,254 deaths**	Includes militants, civilians and security personnel
Farmer–herder violence	2024	**567 deaths**	Down from 860 in 2023
Ethno-communal violence	2024	**170 deaths**	166 were connected to land disputes in the Nigeria Watch classification
Fatalities associated with kidnapping incidents	2024	**425**	Does not represent the total number abducted

Indicator	Period	Recorded value	Interpretation
Children abducted in conflict-related violence	Approximately 2014–2024	**More than 1,680**	Includes abductions at schools and elsewhere
Children killed in attacks on schools	Approximately 2014–2024	**180**	UN-verified reporting cited by UNICEF
Recorded attacks on schools	Approximately 2014–2024	**More than 70**	Religious identity of victims is not consistently coded

Nigeria Watch recorded 6,018 deaths classified under crime in 2024, 567 in farmer–herder violence and 170 in ethno-communal violence. Its report attributed 1,254 deaths to attacks by Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru together with related government counter-operations. (nigeriawatch.org)

UNICEF reported in April 2024 that conflict-related violence over the preceding decade had resulted in more than 1,680 child abductions, 180 children killed in attacks on schools, approximately 60 school personnel abducted, 14 school staff killed and more than 70 verified attacks on schools. Only 37% of assessed schools across ten states had early-warning systems for threats such as armed attacks. (UNICEF)

NORF Evidence Assessment

Evidence confidence: High for the broad scale and geographical concentration of violence.

Evidence confidence: Medium or low for national victim totals disaggregated by religion, because the principal event datasets do not consistently record every victim's faith or determine whether religion was the principal motive.

3.B.7.2 Pattern One: Islamist Insurgency

Actors and geographical concentration

Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province remain concentrated mainly in Borno, Yobe and neighbouring areas, although related extremist activity has also been documented elsewhere. Nigeria Watch recorded **1,254 deaths in 2024** arising from Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru attacks and associated security-force counter-operations. Borno accounted for 960 of these deaths, Yobe for 123, Niger for 118 and Kaduna for 53. At least 15 local government areas in Borno were affected. (nigeriawatch.org)

This total includes different victim categories and cannot be treated as a civilian or religious-persecution total. Nigeria Watch also recorded the deaths of 218 Boko Haram or ISWAP commanders and combatants during internal clashes, illustrating why aggregate insurgency figures must be disaggregated before drawing conclusions concerning civilian religious victimisation. (nigeriawatch.org)

Christian victims

Christian civilians, clergy, churches, schools and predominantly Christian communities have been deliberately targeted by jihadist actors. The European Union Agency for Asylum found that Christians in the North East have been subjected to extreme violence by Boko Haram and identified jihadist organisations, including Boko Haram and ISWAP, among the principal perpetrators of violence against Christians. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Open Doors recorded **3,100 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons** and **2,830 abducted** during its World Watch List 2025 reporting period. It also reported at least 1,000 cases of rape or sexual assault and more than 10,000 cases of physical or psychological abuse, while marking the latter categories as minimum estimates. These figures come from a Christian persecution-monitoring methodology and should not be treated as equivalent to ACLED or Nigeria Watch's nationwide conflict totals. (Open Doors)

For the subsequent World Watch List 2026 reporting period, Open Doors reported **3,490 Christians killed in Nigeria**, representing approximately 72% of the 4,849 Christians it classified as killed for their faith globally. (Open Doors)

Muslim victims

Muslim civilians are also killed by Boko Haram and ISWAP, particularly where communities resist insurgent authority, reject extremist doctrine, cooperate with the state or are accused of informing security forces. USCIRF states that non-state actors regularly kill, kidnap and attack Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions. (USCIRF)

However, NORF did not identify a sufficiently robust, current nationwide dataset that produces a directly comparable annual number of Muslim and Christian civilian victims using the same definitions and coding rules. It would therefore be methodologically unsound to conclude that Muslim and Christian populations suffer equally—or to establish a national ratio using unrelated datasets.

Comparative evidence

One monitoring project cited by the European Union Agency for Asylum estimated that between October 2019 and September 2024, **2.4 Christians were killed for every Muslim recorded as killed** in its Nigerian dataset. In states where attacks against Christians occurred, it reported a ratio of 5.2 Christian victims for every Muslim victim. EUAA also cautioned that some more recent high Christian casualty estimates could not be corroborated independently. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

This evidence suggests disproportionate Christian victimisation within the monitored attack categories, but it should not be presented as a definitive national mortality ratio. The estimate depends on the project's classification of perpetrators, victims, religious identity and motive.

NORF Assessment

Islamist insurgency is both a broad civilian-protection crisis and a direct FoRB threat. It affects Muslims as well as Christians, but the available religion-specific evidence shows that Christians are deliberately targeted and may experience a disproportionately high burden of faith-related killing and abduction in particular regions.

Evidence strength

- Deliberate attacks on Christian communities and institutions: **High**
- Severe Muslim civilian victimisation by jihadist organisations: **High**
- Claim that both communities are affected equally: **Unsupported**
- Precise national Christian-to-Muslim casualty ratio: **Medium–Low**

3.B.7.3 Pattern Two: Farmer–Herder and Middle Belt Violence

Nigeria Watch recorded approximately **567 deaths in farmer–herder clashes during 2024**, down from 860 in 2023. Incidents were recorded across 20 states and the Federal Capital Territory. Benue recorded the highest total, with 376 deaths, followed by Plateau and Kogi. (nigeriawatch.org)

Many affected farming communities in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna and adjacent areas are predominantly Christian, while many pastoralist communities are predominantly Muslim and ethnically Fulani. This overlap makes religious interpretation unavoidable but also creates a high risk of misclassification. Disputes may involve land access, grazing routes, cattle theft, retaliation, local political representation, criminal networks, ethnic mobilisation and religious identity simultaneously.

Religion-specific monitoring nevertheless indicates that Christian communities bear a severe burden. EUAA's review identifies armed Fulani groups, jihadist groups, Boko Haram and ISWAP among actors reported to target Christians and notes persistent allegations that authorities fail to protect affected communities or prosecute perpetrators effectively. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

At the same time, not every attack involving Fulani perpetrators is religiously motivated, and Fulani Muslim communities have themselves suffered killings, cattle theft, displacement and retaliatory violence. Treating "Fulani," "Muslim," "herder," "bandit" and "jihadist" as interchangeable categories would be empirically inaccurate and could reinforce collective blame.

NORF Assessment

The data support three simultaneous conclusions:

1. Predominantly Christian communities in parts of the Middle Belt experience repeated, severe and sometimes deliberately targeted attacks.
2. Religion interacts with ethnicity, land, livelihood, political representation and criminality rather than acting as the sole driver in every incident.
3. Aggregate farmer–herder casualty figures cannot automatically be classified as either Christian persecution or Muslim–Christian conflict.

Evidence strength

- High concentration of fatalities in Benue and Plateau: **High**
- Serious and repeated harm to Christian communities: **High**
- Religious motive in every farmer–herder attack: **Low**
- Presence of multiple overlapping drivers: **High**

3.B.7.4 Pattern Three: Banditry, Kidnapping and Criminal Violence

Crime accounted for **6,018 recorded violent deaths in 2024**, nearly half of Nigeria Watch's national total. Katsina recorded 1,092 crime-related deaths, Zamfara 1,005, Kaduna 844, Niger 451 and Benue 317. Fatalities associated with kidnapping incidents declined from 536 in 2023 to 425 in 2024, although these figures measure deaths connected to kidnapping events rather than the total number of people abducted. (nigeriawatch.org)

Banditry affects Christians, Muslims and traditional religious communities. Religious leaders and institutions may be especially visible targets because churches, seminaries, mosques and religious organisations are perceived as capable of mobilising ransom payments. Abduction of clergy can therefore be financially motivated, religiously motivated or both.

From a FoRB perspective, criminal motivation does not eliminate religious-freedom consequences. Repeated kidnapping of clergy, attacks near places of worship, insecurity on pilgrimage routes and displacement of communities can prevent worship, religious education, pastoral care and humanitarian activity.

NORF Assessment

Banditry is principally a security and organised-crime phenomenon, but it produces significant indirect and sometimes direct FoRB harm. NORF will record separately:

- abducted or killed Christian clergy;
- abducted or killed Muslim clerics;
- attacks on churches, mosques and religious schools;
- events in which a religious motive is established;
- events where the motive remains uncertain.

Evidence strength

- Banditry as a major source of national mortality: **High**
- Substantial FoRB consequences for religious institutions: **High**
- Religious motivation in most bandit kidnappings: **Low–Medium**

3.B.7.5 Pattern Four: Attacks on Religious and Educational Institutions

Schools and religious institutions are important targets because they combine symbolic importance, concentrated civilian presence and limited physical protection.

UNICEF's verified ten-year data recorded more than 70 attacks on schools, over 1,680 abducted children, 180 children killed, approximately 60 abducted school personnel and 14 staff members killed. The data do not consistently disaggregate victims by religion, and many attacked schools were public rather than explicitly religious institutions. (UNICEF)

Nigeria Watch recorded that insurgency-related deaths during 2024 occurred in attacks affecting rural communities, military installations, extremist positions, churches and schools. Its report does not provide a complete national 2024 count of churches and mosques attacked. (nigeriawatch.org)

This evidentiary gap matters. Claims about hundreds or thousands of destroyed churches or mosques often differ substantially because sources count different periods and categories, including damaged buildings, abandoned congregations, closed institutions and structures destroyed during wider village attacks.

NORF Assessment

NORF should publish a religious-institution attack total only where individual events can be deduplicated and coded by:

- date and location;
- institution type;
- religious affiliation;
- perpetrator;
- deaths and injuries;
- apparent motive;
- source confidence.

Until such a dataset is constructed, the report should not offer a single nationwide total that implies more precision than the evidence permits.

3.B.7.6 Geographic Risk Distribution

North East

The principal threat is jihadist insurgency. Borno recorded 1,263 violent deaths in 2024 and 960 of the deaths associated with Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru violence and counter-operations. (nigeriawatch.org)

North West

The dominant threats are banditry, kidnapping and expanding extremist activity. Zamfara recorded the country's highest violent-fatality rate in 2024, at **19.52 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants**, while Katsina and Kaduna also recorded high absolute death totals. (nigeriawatch.org)

Middle Belt and North Central

Benue recorded 376 farmer–herder-related deaths in 2024. Violence in Benue, Plateau and parts of Kaduna combines communal, criminal, ethnic, livelihood and religious dimensions, with predominantly Christian farming communities among those suffering severe repeated attacks. (nigeriawatch.org)

South East

Nigeria Watch recorded 379 deaths associated with pro-Biafra agitation and related security operations in 2024. This violence affects a predominantly Christian region but is primarily classified as political and separatist rather than anti-Christian violence. (nigeriawatch.org)

Southern coastal states

Organised religion-related violence is generally less prevalent than in the northern and central regions, although kidnapping, cult violence, separatist conflict and local disputes can constrain religious life.

NORF Observation

Nigeria should not receive a single undifferentiated violence description. The type, intensity, perpetrators, victims and FoRB implications vary sharply by region.

3.B.7.7 State Response and Accountability

Nigeria has deployed military forces against Boko Haram and ISWAP, conducted operations against bandit groups and supported security and humanitarian interventions. These operations have reduced insurgent territorial control compared with the insurgency's earlier peak, but they have not eliminated attacks or restored secure civilian life across all affected areas.

Nigeria Watch's 2024 figures combine insurgent attacks and government counter-operations in some categories, underscoring that civilian risk can arise from both armed groups and state responses. It also identified criminal gangs and government security forces as the actors involved in more fatal incidents than other protagonist categories during 2024. (nigeriawatch.org)

USCIRF assesses Nigeria's response as inadequate, citing failures to prevent attacks and hold perpetrators accountable. The Nigerian government disputes interpretations that characterise the violence as a coordinated campaign to exterminate Christians, arguing that terrorism, banditry and organised crime affect communities across religious and ethnic lines. Both positions contain elements supported by evidence: the security crisis is multi-causal and affects several communities, while Christian communities are also deliberately and disproportionately targeted in identifiable settings. (USCIRF)

NORF Assessment

The principal state-response weaknesses are:

- insufficient early warning and rapid response;
- low arrest and prosecution rates;
- weak victim-level data;
- uneven rural security presence;
- incomplete protection of displaced communities;
- limited transparency concerning civilian casualties.

Evidence strength: High that protection and accountability remain inadequate in several high-risk regions.

3.B.7.8 FoRB and Human-Rights Impact

The impact of violence extends beyond fatalities. Documented consequences include:

- inability to attend worship safely;
- destruction or abandonment of churches, mosques and schools;
- displacement from religiously significant communities;
- disruption of clergy, pastoral and humanitarian work;
- interruption of religious education;
- forced behavioural conformity under extremist control;
- heightened risks for converts and minority believers;
- fear-driven restrictions on religious dress, speech and assembly.

Humanitarian displacement further weakens religious and community institutions. OCHA estimated that **7.8 million people required humanitarian assistance in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in 2025**, illustrating the scale of the environment in which FoRB rights must be exercised. (OCHA)

3.B.7.9 Evidence-Strength Matrix

Finding	NORF confidence
Nigeria experiences extremely high levels of lethal violence	**High**
Violence is concentrated disproportionately in northern and central states	**High**
Christians are deliberately targeted by jihadist and other armed actors	**High**
Muslims are also extensively killed and abducted by jihadists and bandits	**High**
Christians and Muslims suffer equal victimisation nationally	**Unsupported**
Christian victims are disproportionately represented in some religion-specific datasets	**Medium–High**
All farmer–herder violence is religious persecution	**Low**
State protection and accountability are insufficient in several high-risk areas	**High**
A precise national annual FoRB casualty total is currently possible	**Low**

Integrated NORF Violence Assessment

Nigeria's violence environment is not accurately described either as a purely religious war or as ordinary criminal insecurity with no religious dimension.

The empirical evidence supports a more differentiated conclusion.

First, violence is extensive: Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 violent deaths in 2024**, of which approximately three quarters occurred in northern Nigeria. Crime and banditry accounted for the largest classified component, while Boko Haram, ISWAP and related counter-operations accounted for 1,254 deaths and farmer–herder clashes for 567. (nigeriawatch.org)

Second, Christians experience clear, deliberate and severe targeting. Open Doors recorded 3,100 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons in its World Watch List 2025 period and 3,490 in the subsequent reporting period. A separate religion-specific monitoring dataset cited by EUAA found substantially more recorded Christian than Muslim victims between October 2019 and September 2024. These estimates carry methodological limitations but cannot responsibly be omitted from an assessment of Nigeria. (Open Doors)

Third, Muslims are also major victims of insurgency, banditry and communal violence. Boko Haram and ISWAP kill Muslims who reject their authority, while Muslim communities suffer mass abduction, displacement and criminal violence. The evidence therefore rejects any claim that only Christians are affected. It does **not**, however, justify the earlier implication that the two populations are victimised to the same extent or in the same manner.

NORF concludes that **Christian communities face a particularly acute and, in several regions, disproportionate FoRB threat**, especially from jihadist organisations and armed attacks on predominantly Christian communities. Muslim communities simultaneously face severe violence, principally from jihadist coercion, banditry, communal retaliation and general insecurity. The correct analytical conclusion is therefore not equivalence but **differentiated victimisation**.

The policy response must likewise be differentiated: counter-insurgency in the North East; civilian protection and accountability in the Middle Belt; anti-kidnapping and rural security measures in the North West; protection of religious institutions and clergy nationwide; and systematic collection of victim-level data disaggregated by religion, sex, age, location, perpetrator and probable motive.

Figure 3.29

APA 7 References

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority*.

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Publication caution for the reader

Since the values from Nigeria Watch, Open Doors and other monitoring organisations measure different populations and use different inclusion thresholds, they must remain in separate columns in the report. Adding them together would produce a misleading number. Since this does not comply with the NORF methodology, we have separated them accordingly.

3.B.8 Integrated NORF Assessment: Nigeria

3.B.8.1 Purpose and Method

This section integrates the evidence presented in Sections 3.B.1–3.B.7 to determine the overall condition of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria.

The assessment considers seven dimensions:

1. constitutional and legal protection;
2. government implementation;
3. societal conditions;
4. violence and intimidation;
5. differential impact on religious communities;
6. state protection and accountability;
7. evidentiary confidence.

The integrated assessment does not treat all incidents involving religious communities as religious persecution. NORF distinguishes between:

- violence motivated principally by religion;
- violence in which religion is one of several interacting drivers;
- criminal or political violence that nevertheless restricts religious practice;
- state actions that directly limit Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Particular attention is given to the persecution of Christians, including Christian fatalities, abductions, attacks on churches, clergy and predominantly Christian communities. These findings are presented separately wherever reliable religion-specific data exist.

3.B.8.2 Overall Freedom of Religion or Belief Conditions

Nigeria presents a marked contradiction between **formal constitutional protection** and **uneven practical protection**.

Section 38 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change, manifest and propagate a religion or belief. Section 10 prohibits both the federal government and state governments from adopting an official state religion. (nigeriarights.gov.ng)

These protections provide a substantial legal foundation for FoRB. In practice, however, the ability to exercise those rights varies considerably by:

- state and region;
- majority or minority religious status;
- exposure to armed conflict;
- local political and social conditions;
- access to law enforcement and judicial protection;
- gender, age and displacement status.

The most severe restrictions occur in parts of the North East, North West and Middle Belt, where insurgency, targeted community attacks, banditry, kidnapping and weak state protection combine to constrain worship, religious education, movement and community life.

USCIRF characterises Nigerian religious-freedom conditions as particularly severe and reports that non-state actors regularly kill, abduct and attack Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions, while schools, missions and houses of worship remain targets. It also assesses the government response and accountability mechanisms as inadequate. (uscirf.gov)

NORF Finding

Nigeria possesses meaningful constitutional FoRB guarantees, but these guarantees are not reliably translated into effective protection in high-risk regions.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.3 National Violence and Security Context

Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 deaths in violent incidents during 2024**, an increase from 11,869 in 2023. Borno State recorded the largest absolute number, with 1,263 fatalities. Crime accounted for 6,018 deaths nationally, while Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operations accounted for 1,254 deaths. (nigeriawatch.org)

These figures describe Nigeria's wider security environment and are not themselves totals for religious persecution. Nevertheless, they establish the scale of insecurity within which FoRB must be exercised.

The violence is also geographically differentiated:

Region	Principal threat patterns	Primary FoRB implications
North East	Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency	Targeted attacks, coercion, displacement and destruction of religious institutions
North West	Banditry, abduction and emerging extremist activity	Kidnapping of clergy and worshippers, interrupted worship and community displacement

Region	Principal threat patterns	Primary FoRB implications
Middle Belt	Community attacks, farmer–herder conflict and organised armed violence	Severe harm to predominantly Christian farming communities and retaliatory violence
Southern regions	Crime, separatist violence and localised intimidation	Generally lower organised religion-related violence, but significant local restrictions occur

NORF Finding

Nigeria's national FoRB risk cannot be represented accurately by a single uniform description. Risk is severe but highly dependent on location, perpetrator and religious identity.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.4 Persecution and Victimisation of Christians

Scale of documented Christian victimisation

The evidence demonstrates that Christians face deliberate and severe persecution in several Nigerian regions.

Open Doors recorded the following under its World Watch List 2025 methodology:

Indicator	Recorded Christian victims
Christians killed for faith-related reasons	**3,100**
Christians abducted	**2,830**
Christians raped or sexually assaulted	**At least 1,000**
Christians subjected to physical or psychological abuse	**At least 10,000**

These figures cover the organisation's specified reporting period and reflect its own faith-related persecution methodology. They must not be added directly to general conflict figures from Nigeria Watch or other datasets. (opendoors.org)

For the subsequent World Watch List 2026 reporting period, Open Doors reported **3,490 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons**, an increase from 3,100 in the preceding reporting period. Nigeria accounted for approximately 72% of the 4,849 Christian deaths recorded globally by the organisation during that period. (opendoors.org)

EUAA reports that Christians are especially vulnerable in northern states and that violence affecting Christian communities has extended into the Middle Belt and further south. It identifies Boko Haram, ISWAP and armed groups involved in attacks on predominantly Christian farming communities among the principal threats. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Forms of Christian persecution

Documented forms include:

- killings of Christian civilians;
- abduction and killing of clergy;
- attacks during worship;
- destruction or abandonment of churches;
- attacks on predominantly Christian villages;
- sexual violence;
- forced displacement;
- pressure on converts;
- restrictions on constructing or maintaining churches;
- inadequate protection following threats or previous attacks.

The nature of the risk varies by region. In the North East, jihadist organisations explicitly regard Christian communities as legitimate targets. In parts of the Middle Belt, predominantly Christian farming communities face recurring armed attacks whose motives may combine religious identity, ethnicity, land, local politics and organised criminality. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Disproportionate impact

Religion-specific monitoring indicates that Christians are disproportionately represented among victims in several categories and regions. However, NORF does not present a precise national Christian-to-Muslim fatality ratio because no single comprehensive national dataset consistently codes the religion of every victim, perpetrator and motive.

The appropriate conclusion is therefore:

Christian communities face particularly acute and, in several regions, disproportionate risks of faith-related killing, abduction, displacement and institutional destruction.

This conclusion does not imply that every Christian killed in Nigeria was killed because of religion. It reflects the combination of:

- specifically documented anti-Christian attacks;
- the targeting of churches, clergy and Christian villages;
- high Christian casualty figures in religion-specific datasets;
- the geographic concentration of violence in areas where Christians are vulnerable minorities or exposed rural communities.

NORF Finding

The persecution of Christians is a central and independently evidenced component of Nigeria's FoRB crisis. It must not be obscured by describing all violence solely as criminality, climate conflict or general insecurity.

Evidence confidence: High for deliberate Christian targeting.

Evidence confidence: Medium–High for disproportionate Christian victimisation nationally, owing to incomplete victim-level religious coding.

3.B.8.5 Other Religious Communities at Risk

Muslim civilians also suffer extensive violence, particularly from Boko Haram, ISWAP, bandit groups and retaliatory communal attacks. Jihadist organisations have killed Muslims accused of rejecting extremist ideology, cooperating with state authorities or resisting insurgent taxation and control. USCIRF reports that Muslims, Christians and traditional religious practitioners are all victims of killing, kidnapping and attacks by non-state actors. (uscirf.gov)

EUAA has also documented attacks against Fulani Muslims and other Muslim populations in areas where they are minorities. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Traditional religious practitioners, converts, atheists and members of smaller denominations may face additional risks from:

- local social pressure;
- accusations of blasphemy;
- family or community coercion;
- discriminatory access to institutions;
- weak political representation;
- insecurity affecting small and less-protected religious communities.

The recognition of these victims does not reduce the importance of documenting Christian persecution. NORF's methodology requires differentiated analysis rather than forced equivalence.

NORF Finding

Nigeria's FoRB crisis affects several religious communities, but the form, motive, scale and regional concentration of victimisation differ substantially.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.6 Legal and Institutional Protection

Nigeria's constitutional framework is stronger than its implementation.

Institutional strengths

- an explicit constitutional right to freedom of religion or belief;
- constitutional prohibition of an official state religion;
- functioning federal and state courts;

- religious institutions operating throughout most of the country;
- extensive Christian–Muslim civil-society engagement;
- government security operations against jihadist and criminal organisations.

Institutional weaknesses

- uneven enforcement of constitutional protections;
- slow or absent intervention during attacks;
- limited prosecutions and convictions;
- poor public data on the religion of victims and probable motives;
- inconsistent protection of rural communities;
- insufficient security for places of worship and religious schools;
- legal restrictions involving blasphemy in northern states;
- gaps in reconstruction, compensation and support for displaced communities.

USCIRF reported in 2025 that twelve state governments and the federal government enforce blasphemy provisions and that four Muslims were then incarcerated under blasphemy laws, including two religious leaders. (uscirf.gov)

The existence of victims from the Muslim community under blasphemy laws illustrates that FoRB restrictions cannot be reduced to a Christian–Muslim binary. Nevertheless, Christian communities remain especially exposed to non-state violence in numerous northern and central locations.

NORF Finding

Nigeria's principal institutional failure is not the absence of constitutional protection but the state's inability or unwillingness to provide consistent prevention, protection, investigation and accountability.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.7 Government Protection and Accountability

Federal and state authorities conduct military, police, intelligence and stabilisation operations. These actions have constrained insurgent territorial control and disrupted armed groups, but they have not prevented recurrent attacks on vulnerable communities.

The principal protection deficiencies are:

1. inadequate early warning;
2. delayed security deployment;
3. insufficient permanent rural security presence;
4. low prosecution and conviction rates;
5. limited public reporting on investigations;
6. inadequate victim support and compensation;
7. weak protection for displaced persons returning to insecure areas.

USCIRF's 2025 country update stated that attacks on religious communities were increasing in frequency and remained a major ongoing threat. It also highlighted deficiencies in prevention and accountability. (uscirf.gov)

Government authorities have disputed descriptions of the violence as a coordinated national campaign against Christians, stressing that terrorism, banditry and communal violence affect Nigerians across religious groups. The available evidence supports part of this position: Nigeria's conflicts are multi-causal and Muslims also suffer extensively. It does not negate the substantial evidence that Christian civilians and institutions are deliberately targeted in identifiable regions and event patterns.

NORF Finding

The Nigerian state is actively engaged against armed actors but does not currently provide adequate or equal protection to all religious communities. Protection failures are especially consequential for exposed Christian communities in northern and central states.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.8 Communities and Profiles at Greatest Risk

Very high risk

- Christian communities in parts of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe;
- predominantly Christian farming communities in parts of Benue, Plateau, Kaduna and neighbouring states;
- Christian clergy and church personnel exposed to kidnapping;
- Christian converts in highly restrictive local environments;
- communities previously attacked and lacking permanent security protection.

High risk

- Muslims resisting Boko Haram or ISWAP authority;
- Muslim minorities exposed to retaliatory communal violence;
- schoolchildren and religious students in conflict-affected states;
- internally displaced Christians and Muslims;
- women and girls exposed to abduction, forced marriage and sexual violence;
- local religious leaders involved in mediation or public criticism of armed actors.

Elevated but geographically variable risk

- practitioners of traditional religions;
- atheists and humanists;
- members of small religious denominations;
- persons accused of blasphemy;
- individuals changing or leaving their religion.

NORF Finding

Religious identity interacts with location, occupation, ethnicity, sex, age and displacement. Christian identity is an especially significant risk factor in a number of northern and Middle Belt environments.

3.B.8.9 Integrated NORF Rating

Nigeria FoRB Assessment Matrix

Dimension	NORF rating	Evidence confidence
Constitutional protection	**Strong**	High
Legal consistency	**Mixed**	High
Government implementation	**Uneven**	High
Judicial access	**Available but inconsistent**	Medium–High
Societal religious coexistence	**Mixed and regionally variable**	High
Violence affecting FoRB	**Severe**	High
Persecution risk for Christians	**Severe in several northern and central regions**	High
Risk to Muslims opposing jihadist or communal actors	**Severe in affected regions**	High
Protection of religious institutions	**Inadequate in high-risk areas**	High
Investigation and accountability	**Weak**	High
Reliability of national religion-disaggregated casualty data	**Limited**	High
Overall national FoRB risk	**High**	High
Risk in selected North-East and Middle Belt localities	**Very High to Extreme**	High

3.B.8.10 Country Evidence Dashboard

Key indicator	Verified value or assessment
Violent deaths nationwide	**12,162 in 2024**
Crime-related deaths	**6,018 in 2024**
Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operation deaths	**1,254 in 2024**
Christians killed under WWL 2025 methodology	**3,100**
Christians abducted under WWL 2025 methodology	**2,830**
Christians killed under WWL 2026 methodology	**3,490**

Key indicator	Verified value or assessment
Constitutional FoRB guarantee	**Yes — Section 38**
Prohibition of state religion	**Yes — Section 10**
Principal Christian risk areas	**North East and parts of the Middle Belt/North Central**
Principal perpetrators affecting Christians	**Jihadist organisations, armed attackers of Christian communities, bandits and kidnappers**
Overall state protection	**Uneven and inadequate in high-risk areas**
Overall NORF risk level	**High nationally; Very High to Extreme in selected localities**

Data warning

The Christian persecution figures and nationwide conflict figures use different methodologies, time periods and inclusion criteria. They must be displayed separately and must not be added together.

3.B.8.11 Integrated NORF Conclusion

Nigeria has an extensive constitutional framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a highly religious civil society and many examples of peaceful Christian–Muslim coexistence. These strengths are substantial and should not be overlooked.

They are, however, undermined by severe and geographically concentrated violence, weak accountability, inconsistent state protection, local legal restrictions and the destruction or displacement of religious communities.

The evidence establishes that Christians face a particularly serious threat. Christian civilians, clergy, churches, schools and predominantly Christian settlements are deliberately attacked in parts of northern and central Nigeria. Open Doors recorded 3,100 Nigerian Christians killed and 2,830 abducted under its World Watch List 2025 methodology, rising to 3,490 Christians killed in the subsequent reporting period. These data are methodology-dependent but provide strong evidence that Christian persecution is extensive, lethal and central to Nigeria's FoRB crisis. (opendoors.org)

Muslim communities also experience grave victimisation, particularly from jihadist organisations, banditry and communal retaliation. The evidence therefore does not support an exclusively Christian victim narrative. Nor does it support an assumption of equal or identical victimisation.

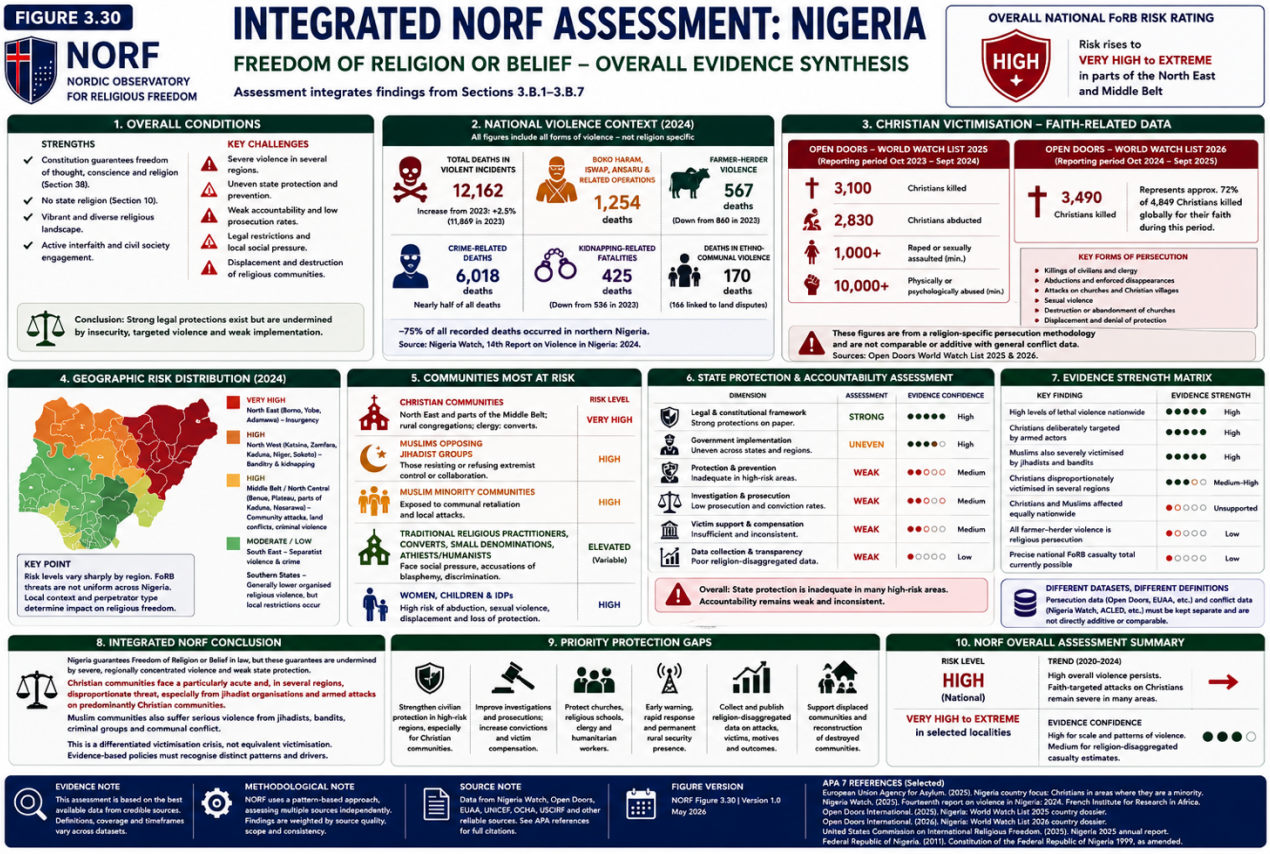
The most empirically defensible conclusion is one of **differentiated victimisation**:

Christians face deliberate, severe and in several regions disproportionate persecution, while Muslims and other religious communities experience distinct but also serious forms of violence, coercion and insecurity.

NORF consequently rates Nigeria's overall FoRB risk as **High**, rising to **Very High or Extreme** for exposed Christian communities and other vulnerable populations in selected parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

The decisive policy challenge is the gap between rights formally guaranteed by the Constitution and the state's practical ability to protect people exercising those rights. Nigeria's FoRB situation will not improve materially without stronger civilian protection, systematic prosecution of perpetrators, transparent religion-disaggregated victim data, protection of churches and other religious institutions, and sustained assistance to communities displaced or destroyed by violence.

Figure 3.30



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3.B.9 Future Outlook and Risk Assessment

3.B.9.1 Purpose and Method

The NORF Future Outlook and Risk Assessment evaluates the likely trajectory of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Nigeria over the coming three to five years. Rather than attempting to predict specific events, the assessment identifies structural trends, emerging risks and resilience factors that are likely to influence the ability of individuals and communities to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

The assessment is based on the evidence presented throughout Sections 3.B.1–3.B.8 and incorporates recent conflict, governance and humanitarian data. Risk ratings are expressed qualitatively and reflect the current state of evidence rather than deterministic forecasts.

NORF evaluates six dimensions:

- Security;
- Government capacity;
- Legal and institutional developments;
- Societal relations;
- Christian persecution;
- Overall FoRB risk.

3.B.9.2 Key Drivers Shaping the Future

The evidence indicates that Nigeria's FoRB environment will be shaped primarily by six structural drivers.

Driver 1 – Persistence of Armed Islamist Groups

Although Boko Haram has lost much of the territory it once controlled, both Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) retain the capacity to conduct attacks against civilians, religious communities, humanitarian actors and government forces.

Recent security operations have degraded command structures, but attacks continue across Borno and neighbouring states. The persistence of insurgent networks suggests that jihadist violence will remain one of the principal threats to FoRB in north-eastern Nigeria.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 2 – Violence Against Christian Communities

Evidence presented in Section 3.B.7 demonstrates that Christian communities continue to experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of faith-related violence.

Open Doors documented:

- **3,100 Christians killed** under the World Watch List 2025 methodology;
- **2,830 Christians abducted**;
- **more than 1,000 cases of sexual violence**;
- **more than 10,000 cases of physical or psychological abuse**.

The continuation of attacks on churches, clergy and predominantly Christian villages suggests that these risks are unlikely to disappear in the short term.

The greatest concern is not only casualty numbers but also the cumulative effects of displacement, fear, destruction of religious infrastructure and declining confidence in state protection.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Very High

Driver 3 – Banditry and Organised Criminal Violence

North-western Nigeria continues to experience widespread banditry, kidnapping and organised criminal activity.

Nigeria Watch attributed **6,018 deaths to crime during 2024**, making organised criminal violence one of the country's largest sources of insecurity.

Although most criminal groups are financially motivated rather than ideologically driven, their activities increasingly affect:

- churches;
- clergy;
- mosques;
- schools;
- humanitarian organisations;
- rural communities.

The expansion of criminal violence into previously less affected areas could increase indirect restrictions on FoRB.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 4 – Weak Accountability

Despite ongoing military operations, prosecution and conviction rates remain comparatively low relative to the scale of violence.

Repeated attacks without effective investigation contribute to:

- community mistrust;
- cycles of retaliation;
- continued displacement;
- reduced confidence in state institutions.

Unless accountability mechanisms improve significantly, insecurity is likely to remain self-reinforcing.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 5 – Demographic and Environmental Pressures

Nigeria's population exceeded **230 million** in 2024 and is projected to continue growing rapidly over the coming decades. Combined with climate variability, land degradation and increasing competition for natural resources, demographic growth is expected to intensify pressures in several conflict-prone regions.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in parts of the Middle Belt, where disputes over land use, grazing routes and local political authority intersect with religious and ethnic identities.

The evidence does not support reducing these conflicts to climate or religion alone; rather, they reflect interacting structural pressures that may heighten local FoRB risks if left unresolved.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Moderate–High

Driver 6 – Institutional Resilience

Nigeria possesses important institutional strengths that may reduce future risks.

These include:

- constitutional protection of FoRB;
- an independent judiciary;
- active religious organisations;
- interfaith initiatives;
- civil society engagement;
- international cooperation;
- expanding early-warning mechanisms in some states.

These institutions provide a foundation for improvement if supported by sustained political commitment and adequate resources.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Moderate (Protective Factor)

3.B.9.3 Risk Assessment by Community

Community	Current Risk	Five-Year Outlook	Evidence Confidence
Christians in North East	**Very High**	**Very High**	High
Christians in Middle Belt	**Very High**	**Very High**	High
Christian clergy	**High**	**High**	High
Christian converts	**High**	**High**	Medium–High
Muslims opposing jihadist organisations	**High**	**High**	High
Muslim minority communities	**Moderate–High**	**Moderate–High**	Medium
Traditional religious communities	**Moderate**	**Moderate**	Medium
Internally displaced persons	**High**	**High**	High
Women and girls	**High**	**High**	High
Children	**High**	**High**	High

3.B.9.4 Early Warning Indicators

NORF identifies several indicators that should be monitored to detect deterioration or improvement in FoRB conditions.

Indicators of Deterioration

- increasing attacks on churches and clergy;
- rising numbers of Christian abductions;
- expansion of ISWAP operations;
- spread of banditry into new regions;
- declining prosecution rates;

- increased displacement of religious communities;
- attacks on schools and religious education;
- heightened intercommunal mobilisation along religious lines.

Indicators of Improvement

- declining attacks on religious institutions;
- increased arrests and convictions;
- improved civilian protection in rural areas;
- reduced kidnapping rates;
- strengthened community mediation;
- improved early-warning systems;
- increased safe return of displaced communities;
- enhanced transparency in reporting violence.

3.B.9.5 Future Scenarios (2026–2030)

Scenario A – Gradual Improvement (Probability: Moderate)

Security operations continue to weaken insurgent organisations, prosecution improves, rural policing expands and interfaith cooperation reduces local tensions.

Under this scenario:

- attacks gradually decline;
- displacement decreases;
- FoRB protection improves incrementally;
- Christian communities regain greater confidence in state protection.

Scenario B – Continued Stalemate (Probability: High)

Violence remains geographically concentrated but persistent.

Government institutions prevent major territorial expansion of insurgent groups but struggle to protect rural populations consistently.

Banditry continues at high levels.

Christian communities remain disproportionately exposed in several northern and central regions.

Overall FoRB conditions improve only marginally.

Scenario C – Escalation (Probability: Moderate–Low)

Renewed insurgent activity, worsening communal violence, expanding criminal networks and declining institutional capacity produce broader insecurity.

Possible consequences include:

- increased displacement;
- more attacks on religious institutions;
- reduced humanitarian access;
- declining trust in public institutions;
- increased restrictions on FoRB.

Although not considered the most likely scenario, it remains plausible if security conditions deteriorate significantly.

3.B.9.6 NORF Strategic Risk Matrix

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall Risk
Islamist insurgency	High	Very High	**Very High**
Violence against Christian communities	High	Very High	**Very High**
Banditry and kidnapping	High	High	**High**
Farmer–herder violence	Moderate–High	High	**High**
Weak accountability	High	High	**High**
Attacks on religious institutions	Moderate–High	High	**High**
Blasphemy-related restrictions	Moderate	Moderate	**Moderate**
Interfaith deterioration	Moderate	High	**Moderate–High**
National constitutional rollback	Low	Very High	**Moderate**

3.B.9.7 NORF Outlook Dashboard

Dimension	Current Status	Trend
Constitutional protection	Strong	→ Stable
Government implementation	Uneven	→ Stable
Security	Poor in conflict regions	→ Stable to Slight Improvement
Christian persecution	Severe	→ Persistent
Muslim victimisation by insurgents	Severe	→ Persistent
Banditry	High	→ Persistent
Accountability	Weak	→ Limited Improvement
Overall FoRB	High Risk	→ Stable

3.B.9.8 Integrated NORF Future Assessment

The evidence suggests that Nigeria will continue to experience significant challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief over the medium term. The country's constitutional framework remains comparatively strong, and active civil society, interfaith engagement and ongoing security operations provide important foundations for improvement. However, these strengths are offset by persistent insurgency, widespread criminal violence, uneven state protection and limited accountability.

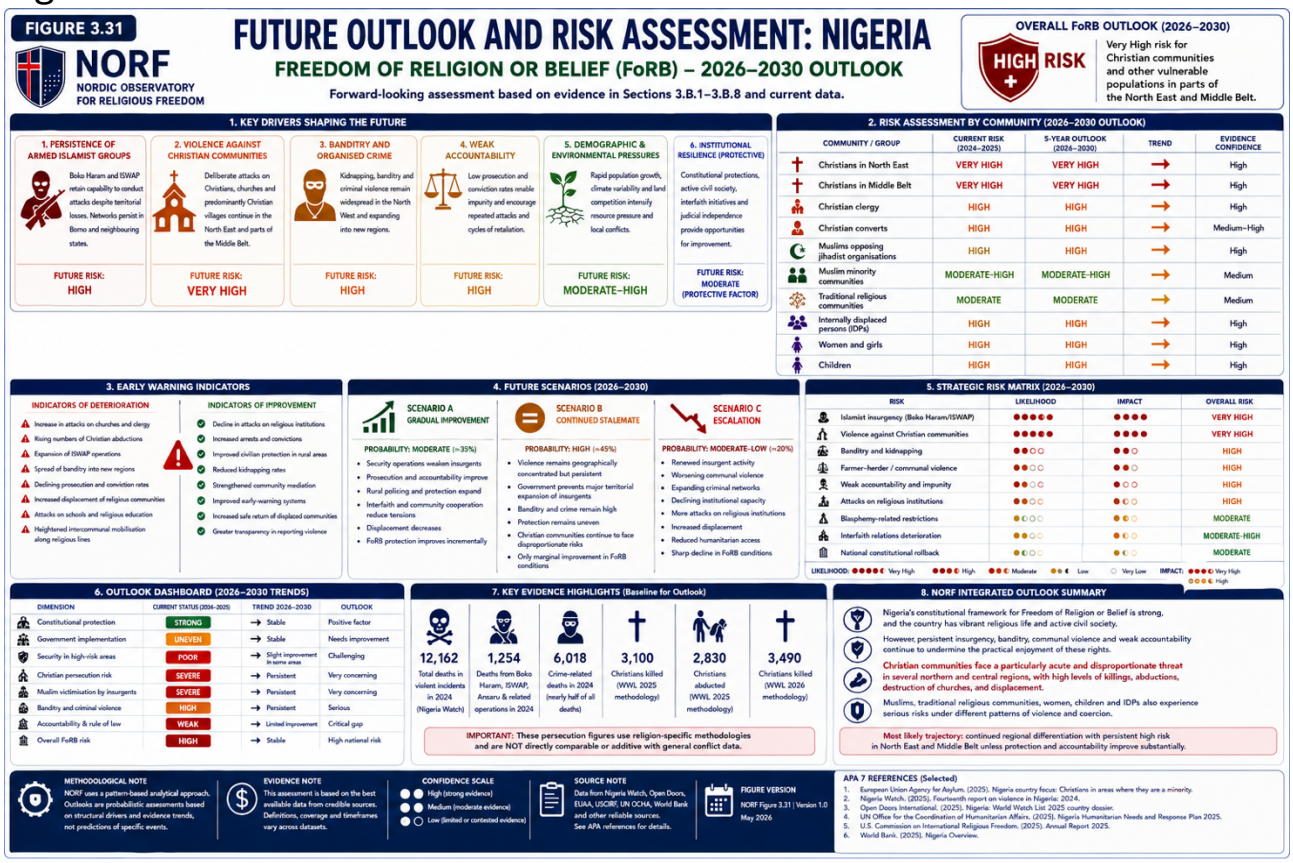
For Christian communities, the outlook remains particularly concerning. The verified evidence presented in this report indicates sustained and deliberate attacks on Christian civilians, clergy, churches and predominantly Christian communities in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. Unless there are substantial improvements in civilian protection, investigation of attacks and prosecution of perpetrators, these communities are likely to remain at **Very High** risk.

Muslim communities will also continue to face serious threats from jihadist organisations, bandit groups and communal violence, particularly where they resist extremist control or are caught in broader insecurity. Traditional religious practitioners, converts and smaller religious communities are also expected to remain vulnerable in specific local contexts.

Overall, NORF assesses that the most likely trajectory for Nigeria over the next three to five years is one of **continued regional differentiation rather than nationwide deterioration or rapid improvement**. Security gains may occur in some areas, while others continue to experience persistent violence and weak protection. The principal challenge is therefore not the absence of legal guarantees but the state's uneven capacity to ensure that those guarantees are realised in practice.

NORF Overall Five-Year Outlook: High FoRB Risk, with **Very High** risk for Christian communities and other vulnerable populations in selected areas of the North East and Middle Belt.

Figure 3.31



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3.B.10 Priority Areas for Engagement

3.B.10.1 Purpose and Method

This section translates the findings of the Nigeria assessment into practical and measurable priorities for government authorities, religious institutions, civil society, international partners and humanitarian actors.

The priorities are derived from the evidence presented in Sections 3.B.1–3.B.9. They are selected according to five criteria:

- severity of harm;
- number and vulnerability of affected persons;
- likelihood of preventing further violations;
- feasibility of implementation;
- relevance to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The priorities do not presume that all violence involving religious communities has a single cause. Measures must distinguish between jihadist insurgency, targeted persecution, communal violence, banditry, legal restrictions and broader failures of state protection.

NORF places particular emphasis on the protection of Christian communities because the evidence demonstrates extensive killings, abductions, displacement and attacks on Christian institutions in parts of northern and central Nigeria. This focus must remain consistent with the wider NORF methodology: all findings and interventions must be evidence-based, independently verifiable and attentive to victims from every religious or belief community.

3.B.10.2 Priority One: Protect High-Risk Christian Communities

Rationale

Christian communities in parts of the North East and Middle Belt face a particularly acute risk of killing, abduction, displacement and destruction of religious infrastructure.

Religion-specific monitoring recorded **3,100 Nigerian Christians killed** and **2,830 abducted** during the World Watch List 2025 reporting period. The subsequent reporting period recorded **3,490 Christians killed**. These figures arise from a persecution-monitoring methodology and must remain analytically separate from general conflict statistics. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that Christian victimisation is extensive and cannot be treated merely as an incidental consequence of national insecurity.

EUAA identifies jihadist organisations, armed attackers of predominantly Christian communities and criminal groups among the principal sources of serious harm to Christians in areas where they are minorities. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Required Actions

Federal and state authorities should:

- identify Christian communities with repeated histories of attack;
- establish permanent or rapidly deployable protection in exposed rural areas;
- protect churches during worship and major religious festivals;
- strengthen security around seminaries, Christian schools and clergy residences;
- provide secure transport corridors for vulnerable congregations;
- support the safe return of displaced Christian communities;
- reconstruct churches and community facilities destroyed during attacks.

Protection should be based on verified local risk assessments rather than political or denominational influence.

Measurable Indicators

Indicator	Proposed measure
Repeated attacks on identified high-risk Christian communities	Annual reduction
Average security-response time	Recorded by state and local government area
Churches receiving formal security assessments	Number and percentage
Displaced Christian communities safely returned	Number of households and communities
Destroyed churches reconstructed or compensated	Annual number
Attacks during worship	Annual number, fatalities and injuries

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical

Expected FoRB impact: Very High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.3 Priority Two: Strengthen Early Warning and Rapid Response

Rationale

Many attacks occur in rural communities with limited permanent security presence. Reports of delayed intervention, inadequate prevention and weak communication between communities and security authorities recur across high-risk areas.

USCIRF assesses that Nigerian authorities frequently fail to respond adequately to violence or hold perpetrators accountable. Its 2025 reporting describes particularly severe religious-freedom conditions and continuing attacks against Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions. (uscirf.gov)
The scale of violence reinforces the need for preventive mechanisms. Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 violent deaths in 2024**, including **1,254 deaths** associated with Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operations, **567 deaths** in farmer–herder violence and **6,018 crime-related deaths**. (nigeriawatch.org)

Required Actions

Authorities should develop locally integrated systems connecting:

- religious leaders;
- village representatives;
- women's and youth organisations;
- police;
- civil-defence personnel;
- military units where relevant;
- emergency medical services;
- state conflict-management agencies.

Early-warning reports should trigger predefined response procedures, including verification, civilian evacuation, security deployment and post-incident investigation.
Special attention should be given to warnings involving:

- threats against churches or clergy;
- armed mobilisation near vulnerable villages;
- unusual movement of armed groups;
- attacks on neighbouring communities;
- kidnapping preparations;
- inflammatory religious messaging;
- threats surrounding religious festivals.

Measurable Indicators

- number of high-risk local government areas with functioning early-warning systems;
- percentage of verified warnings receiving a documented response;
- average time from warning to deployment;
- number of attacks prevented or disrupted;
- number of communities with tested evacuation and communication procedures.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical
Expected FoRB impact: Very High
Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.4 Priority Three: End Impunity Through Investigation and Prosecution

Rationale

The deterrent effect of security operations is weakened when perpetrators of killings, abductions and attacks on religious institutions are not investigated or prosecuted effectively.

USCIRF has repeatedly identified inadequate accountability as a central feature of Nigeria's religious-freedom crisis. It reports that federal and state authorities have tolerated, inadequately responded to or failed to pursue justice for serious abuses by non-state actors. (uscirf.gov)

Weak accountability is especially damaging where communities have experienced repeated attacks. The absence of prosecutions:

- encourages further violence;
- increases perceptions of state indifference;
- contributes to retaliatory mobilisation;
- discourages displaced persons from returning;
- erodes confidence in constitutional protections.

Required Actions

Nigeria should establish specialised investigative and prosecutorial capacity for:

- mass-casualty village attacks;
- killings and abductions of clergy;
- attacks on churches, mosques and religious schools;
- conflict-related sexual violence;
- destruction of religious property;
- incitement and direct threats preceding violence.

Every major incident should produce a publicly traceable case record showing:

1. date and location;
2. alleged perpetrators;
3. victims and institutions affected;
4. status of investigation;
5. arrests;
6. charges;
7. trial outcomes;
8. compensation or reparations.

Measurable Indicators

Indicator	Required reporting
Major attacks formally investigated	Number and percentage
Suspects arrested	Number
Cases prosecuted	Number
Convictions obtained	Number and offence
Average duration from attack to charge	Days or months
Victims receiving case updates	Percentage
Unresolved attacks older than two years	Number

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical

Expected FoRB impact: Very High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.5 Priority Four: Create a National FoRB Incident and Victim Database

Rationale

Nigeria lacks a comprehensive public dataset that consistently records:

- the religion or belief of victims;
- the religious identity of affected institutions;
- probable perpetrator;
- apparent motive;
- deaths, injuries and abductions;
- displacement;
- investigation and prosecution outcomes.

This data gap prevents reliable national comparison between Christian, Muslim and other victims. It also allows competing narratives to rely on incompatible statistics.

Nigeria Watch provides valuable national violence data, while Open Doors, USCIRF, EUAA and other organisations provide religion-specific or thematic evidence. These datasets differ in methodology, reporting periods and inclusion criteria and therefore cannot simply be added together. (nigeriawatch.org)

Required Actions

A national multi-agency FoRB incident database should be established under an institution with statutory independence, ideally involving the National Human Rights Commission, National Bureau of Statistics, police, emergency authorities and accredited civil-society monitors.

Each event should be coded according to:

- geographic coordinates;
- date;
- incident category;
- victims' religion or belief, where reliably established;
- institution affected;
- perpetrator category;
- probable motivation;
- source reliability;
- number killed, injured, abducted or displaced;
- official response;
- judicial outcome.

Religious identity should be recorded only with appropriate safeguards and informed sensitivity. Uncertain data must be marked as unknown rather than inferred from names, ethnicity or location.

Measurable Indicators

- publication of a common national coding protocol;
- percentage of recorded incidents containing victim-level information;
- number of independently verified events;
- frequency of public data releases;
- proportion of events with investigation-status updates;
- number of duplicate or disputed records resolved.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.6 Priority Five: Protect Clergy, Worshippers and Religious Institutions

Rationale

Churches, mosques, schools, missions and clergy are visible and sometimes poorly protected targets.

The abduction of clergy and worshippers may involve ideological, financial or mixed motives. Regardless of motive, repeated attacks can close congregations, interrupt religious education and deter public worship.

Nigeria's broader pattern of school attacks also demonstrates institutional vulnerability. Humanitarian and child-protection reporting has documented mass abductions, fatalities and repeated attacks affecting educational environments.

Required Actions

Federal and state authorities, working with religious organisations, should implement:

- security audits for high-risk institutions;
- emergency communication systems;
- controlled access during major services;
- safe-room and evacuation procedures;
- liaison officers for religious institutions;
- training in evidence preservation and incident reporting;
- confidential threat-reporting channels;
- secure travel protocols for high-risk clergy.

Protection programmes should cover churches, mosques, traditional religious sites and non-religious belief communities according to evidence of risk.

Christian institutions in high-risk areas should receive particular attention because of the documented scale of targeted attacks and abductions.

Measurable Indicators

- number of institutions assessed;
- number implementing security plans;
- attacks by institution type;
- clergy killed or abducted, disaggregated by religion;
- worshippers killed or abducted during religious activities;
- average police response time to institution-based incidents.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical in high-risk regions

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.7 Priority Six: Support Victims, Displaced Communities and Reconstruction

Rationale

Violence affects FoRB long after an attack ends. Displacement can permanently dismantle congregations, separate communities from religious leaders and prevent the transmission of religious traditions.

The humanitarian crisis remains extensive in north-eastern Nigeria. OCHA's 2025 plan estimated that approximately **7.8 million people required humanitarian assistance** across Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, including 3.7 million in Borno, 2.1 million in Adamawa and 2 million in Yobe. (ReliefWeb)

By the end of 2025, the humanitarian response had received only about **31% of its required funding**, according to OCHA's annual dashboard. This funding shortfall limits protection, shelter, education and recovery programmes. (unocha.org)

Required Actions

Victim assistance should include:

- emergency medical treatment;
- trauma and psychosocial support;
- legal assistance;
- livelihood recovery;
- replacement of identity and property documents;
- compensation for destroyed homes and religious institutions;
- education for displaced children;
- support for survivors of sexual violence;
- safe and voluntary return or local integration.

Christian communities displaced by targeted attacks should receive transparent and equitable reconstruction support, including rebuilding churches, schools and community infrastructure.

Measurable Indicators

- victims receiving medical and psychosocial services;
- displaced households receiving durable solutions;
- religious institutions reconstructed;
- survivors receiving compensation;
- percentage of returns assessed as safe and voluntary;
- proportion of displaced children returned to education.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.8 Priority Seven: Address Conflict Drivers Without Erasing Religious Persecution

Rationale

Violence in Nigeria may involve land, ethnicity, political representation, organised crime, environmental pressure and religious identity simultaneously.

Policies that describe all Middle Belt violence exclusively as religious conflict risk oversimplification. Policies that describe it solely as farmer–herder competition, climate stress or crime can equally obscure the deliberate targeting of predominantly Christian communities.

NORF therefore recommends a dual analytical approach:

Address material and political conflict drivers while separately documenting evidence of religious targeting and Christian persecution.

Required Actions

Conflict-prevention programmes should address:

- land tenure;
- grazing access;
- cattle theft;
- arms proliferation;
- local political representation;
- displaced-community return;
- impunity;

- inflammatory religious or ethnic mobilisation.

At the same time, investigations should establish whether:

- victims were selected because they were Christian;
- churches or Christian festivals were specifically targeted;
- perpetrators issued religious threats;
- attackers sought to remove a religious community from an area;
- attacks formed part of a repeated pattern against Christian settlements.

Measurable Indicators

- number of incidents receiving multidisciplinary motive assessments;
- number of land disputes resolved through lawful mechanisms;
- reduction in repeat attacks;
- publication of motive assessments;
- proportion of affected Christian communities participating in peace and security planning.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.9 Priority Eight: Review Blasphemy and Religious-Offence Laws

Rationale

Twelve northern states apply Sharia criminal provisions alongside federal and state law. Blasphemy provisions create risks for Muslims, Christians, converts, humanists and others whose expression is viewed as religiously offensive.

USCIRF reports that twelve states enforce blasphemy laws and describes their application as a significant restriction on FoRB. (uscirf.gov)

The threat extends beyond formal prosecution. Accusations can provoke mob violence, social exclusion and threats even where no conviction occurs.

Required Actions

Nigeria should:

- review blasphemy provisions for compatibility with constitutional and international human-rights obligations;
- prevent criminal penalties for peaceful religious expression;
- guarantee legal representation and fair trial;
- protect accused persons from mob violence;
- investigate those who incite or commit violence following allegations;
- train judges, prosecutors and police on FoRB standards.

Restrictions should focus on direct incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility—not criticism, disagreement, conversion or peaceful religious discussion.

Measurable Indicators

- persons arrested or detained for blasphemy-related offences;
- prosecutions and convictions;
- reported mob attacks following accusations;
- protective interventions by police;
- laws amended or repealed;
- judicial decisions referencing constitutional FoRB guarantees.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.10 Priority Nine: Strengthen Local Interfaith Resilience

Rationale

Nigeria's religious landscape contains significant traditions of peaceful coexistence, shared community institutions and interfaith cooperation. These protective factors should be strengthened without shifting responsibility for security from the state to religious communities.

Interfaith initiatives are most effective when they address concrete local problems rather than relying only on symbolic dialogue.

Required Actions

Local programmes should involve:

- Christian and Muslim leaders;
- traditional religious representatives;
- women and youth;
- local government;
- security authorities;
- displaced communities;
- educators and journalists.

Priority activities should include:

- community-based early warning;
- mediation of local disputes;
- prevention of retaliatory violence;
- joint condemnation of attacks;
- protection of converts and minorities;
- countering misinformation;
- victim-centred reconciliation.

Interfaith dialogue must never be used to minimise Christian casualties, pressure victims to abandon demands for justice or portray documented persecution as a misunderstanding between equivalent parties.

Measurable Indicators

- local interfaith mechanisms operating in high-risk areas;
- disputes resolved before escalation;
- joint public responses to attacks;
- representation of women, youth and victims;
- reduction in retaliatory incidents;
- victim satisfaction and trust indicators.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Moderate–High

Expected FoRB impact: Moderate–High

Evidence confidence: Medium–High

3.B.10.11 Priority Ten: Make International Assistance Conditional, Coordinated and Measurable

Rationale

International partners provide security assistance, humanitarian aid, development support and diplomatic engagement. These resources should be linked to measurable improvements in civilian protection and FoRB.

External engagement should avoid two errors:

- reducing all violence to a single religious narrative;
- avoiding the documented persecution of Christians in the name of conflict complexity.

Required Actions

International partners should:

- condition relevant security assistance on civilian-protection standards;
- require transparent reporting on attacks and prosecutions;
- support independent monitoring of Christian and other religious victims;
- fund protection for high-risk communities;
- strengthen forensic and investigative capacity;
- support rehabilitation of displaced communities;
- ensure that aid reaches minority communities;
- assess whether security units implicated in abuses receive assistance.

Diplomatic engagement should include explicit, evidence-based discussion of:

- killings and abductions of Christians;
- attacks on churches and Christian communities;
- jihadist violence against Muslims;
- blasphemy cases;
- prosecution failures;
- protection of converts and minority believers.

Measurable Indicators

- assistance programmes containing FoRB and civilian-protection benchmarks;
- public reporting against those benchmarks;
- investigations and prosecutions supported through international cooperation;
- funding reaching high-risk religious communities;
- verified reductions in attacks in supported areas.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.12 NORF Priority Matrix

Priority	Urgency	Expected impact	Primary responsibility
Protect high-risk Christian communities	**Critical**	Very High	Federal and state security authorities
Early warning and rapid response	**Critical**	Very High	State governments, police and community structures
Investigation and prosecution	**Critical**	Very High	Police, prosecutors and judiciary
National FoRB incident database	**High**	High	Human-rights and statistical institutions
Protect clergy and religious institutions	**Critical in high-risk areas**	High	Security agencies and religious organisations
Victim support and reconstruction	**High**	High	Government and humanitarian actors
Address conflict drivers and religious targeting	**High**	High	Federal, state and local authorities
Reform blasphemy and religious-offence laws	**High**	High	Legislatures, courts and government
Strengthen local interfaith resilience	**Moderate–High**	Moderate–High	Civil society and religious leaders
Conditional and measurable international assistance	**High**	High	International partners and Nigerian authorities

3.B.10.13 Implementation Timeline

Immediate: 0–12 Months

- identify the highest-risk Christian and other religious communities;
- deploy rapid-response protection mechanisms;
- initiate investigations into unresolved mass-casualty attacks;
- begin security audits of churches and religious schools;
- publish a national FoRB incident-coding protocol;
- provide emergency support to displaced victims.

Short Term: 1–3 Years

- establish the national FoRB database;
- increase prosecutions and convictions;
- reconstruct destroyed religious institutions;
- expand early-warning systems across high-risk states;
- review blasphemy provisions;
- establish formal victim-compensation procedures.

Medium Term: 3–5 Years

- reduce repeat attacks in identified high-risk areas;
- ensure consistent religion-disaggregated reporting;
- create durable solutions for displaced communities;
- institutionalise civilian-protection benchmarks;
- integrate FoRB indicators into national security and development planning.

3.B.10.14 NORF Monitoring Indicators

NORF recommends that progress be reviewed annually through the following core indicators:

1. Christians killed in verified faith-related incidents;
2. Christians abducted in verified faith-related incidents;
3. clergy killed or abducted, by religion;
4. attacks on churches, mosques and other religious institutions;
5. violent deaths in high-risk local government areas;
6. displaced religious communities;
7. security-response times;
8. investigations, prosecutions and convictions;
9. compensation and reconstruction outcomes;
10. blasphemy arrests and prosecutions;
11. community trust in security institutions;
12. reliability and completeness of official FoRB data.

Christian casualty and victim data should appear explicitly in every annual NORF update and should not be absorbed into undifferentiated national conflict totals.

3.B.10.15 Integrated NORF Engagement Assessment

Nigeria's FoRB crisis cannot be addressed through constitutional guarantees or military operations alone. Effective engagement requires simultaneous investment in civilian protection, justice, reliable data, victim recovery and local conflict prevention.

The most urgent requirement is the protection of Christian communities facing repeated and severe attacks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. The evidence demonstrates substantial Christian

killings, abductions, displacement and destruction of churches and communities. These harms must be recorded explicitly and addressed through targeted protection measures.

This priority does not require NORF to disregard Muslim, traditional religious or non-religious victims. Rather, it reflects the methodology of differentiated victimisation: each community must be assessed according to the pattern, scale and motive of the harm it experiences.

Nigeria's government retains the primary responsibility to protect all persons within its jurisdiction. International partners and religious organisations can support this responsibility, but they cannot substitute for effective policing, investigation, prosecution and accountable government.

NORF therefore identifies four immediate tests of meaningful progress:

Are high-risk Christian and other vulnerable communities safer?

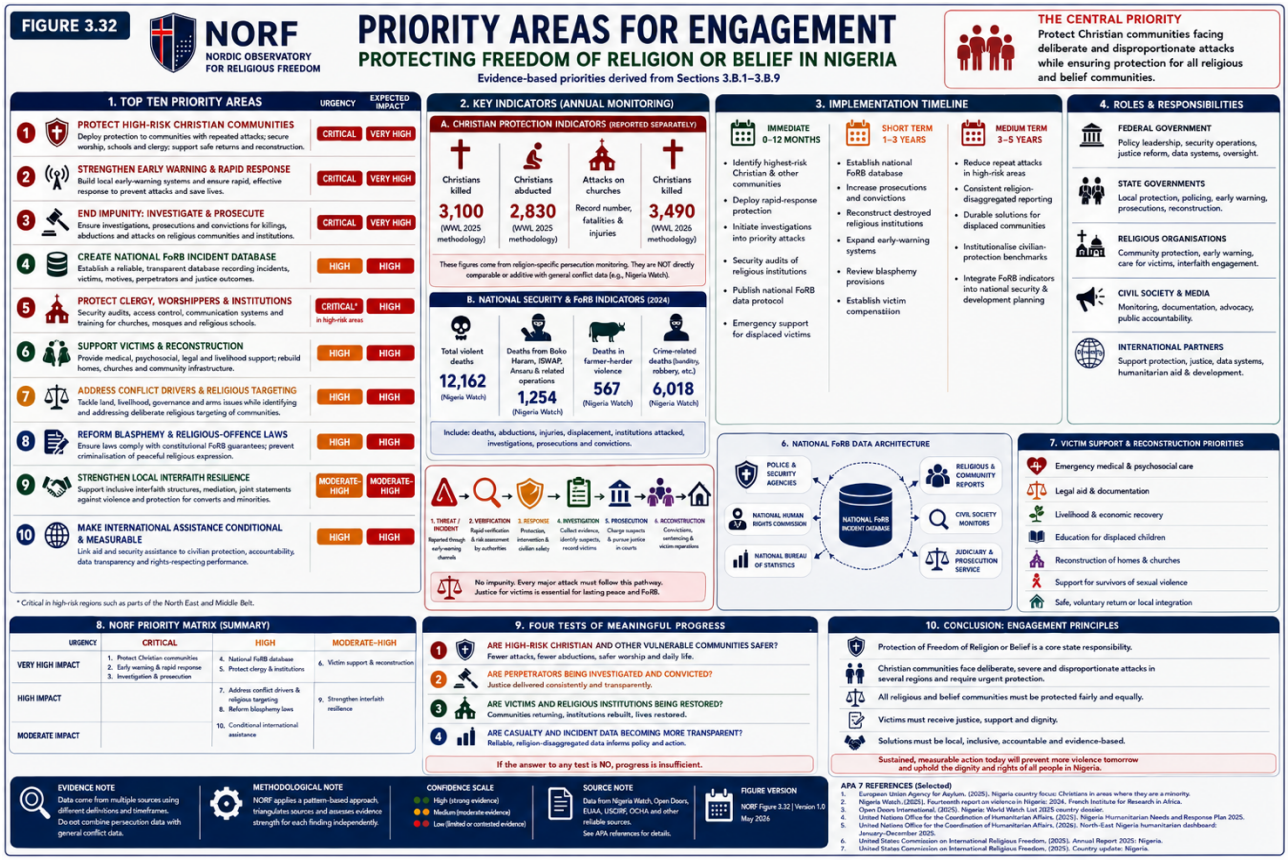
Are perpetrators being investigated and convicted?

Are victims and religious institutions being restored?

Are casualty and incident data becoming more transparent and reliable?

Without measurable improvement in these four areas, Nigeria's formal constitutional commitments will continue to coexist with severe practical restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Figure 3.32



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3.B.11 Executive Country Summary

3.B.11.1 Country Overview

Indicator	Assessment
Country	Federal Republic of Nigeria
Estimated Population (2024)	~230 million
Constitutional Protection of FoRB	Strong (Sections 10 & 38 of the Constitution)
Dominant Religions	Islam and Christianity
Principal Conflict Regions	North East, Middle Belt, North West
NORF Overall FoRB Risk	**High**
Highest Regional Risk	**Very High–Extreme**
Evidence Confidence	**High**

3.B.11.2 Executive Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of Africa's strongest constitutional frameworks protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion while prohibiting the adoption of a state religion.

These legal protections are not consistently realised in practice.

Large parts of northern and central Nigeria continue to experience severe insecurity resulting from jihadist insurgency, organised criminal violence, communal conflict and weak state protection. These conditions significantly restrict the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The evidence assessed throughout this report demonstrates that Christian communities experience particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of persecution. Muslims, particularly those opposing extremist organisations, also experience serious violence, while practitioners of traditional religions, converts and smaller religious communities face additional localised risks.

The principal challenge is therefore **not constitutional design**, but **uneven implementation and insufficient civilian protection**.

3.B.11.3 Key Empirical Findings

National Security Environment

Indicator	Latest Verified Data
Violent deaths (2024)	**12,162**
Crime-related deaths	**6,018**
Boko Haram / ISWAP / Ansaru & related operations	**1,254 deaths**

Indicator	Latest Verified Data
Farmer–Herder violence	**567 deaths**
Kidnapping-related fatalities	**425**

Source: Nigeria Watch 2025.

Christian Victimisation

Religion-specific monitoring recorded:

Indicator	Verified Figure
Christians killed (WWL 2025 methodology)	**3,100**
Christians abducted	**2,830**
Sexual violence	**>1,000**
Physical / psychological abuse	**>10,000**
Christians killed (WWL 2026 methodology)	**3,490**

These figures derive from Open Doors' persecution-monitoring methodology and are **not directly comparable** with nationwide conflict datasets.

Children and Education

UNICEF documented:

- over **1,680 children abducted**
- **180 children killed**
- **more than 70 attacks on schools**

during the decade following the Chibok abductions.

3.B.11.4 Principal Findings

Finding 1

Nigeria's constitutional framework provides substantial legal protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 2

Implementation of constitutional protections remains inconsistent across regions.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 3

Islamist insurgency remains the greatest organised threat to Freedom of Religion or Belief in north-eastern Nigeria.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 4

Christian communities experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of persecution involving killings, abductions, attacks on churches and displacement.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 5

Muslim communities also experience extensive violence, particularly from jihadist organisations, banditry and communal conflict, although patterns of victimisation differ.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 6

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be explained solely through religion.

Political competition, ethnicity, organised crime, land disputes, governance weaknesses and insurgency frequently interact with religious identity.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 7

Weak investigation and prosecution continue to undermine public confidence and contribute to recurring violence.

Evidence Confidence: High

3.B.11.5 Communities at Greatest Risk

Community	Risk Level
Christians in North East	**Very High**
Christians in Middle Belt	**Very High**
Christian clergy	**High**
Christian converts	**High**
Muslims opposing Boko Haram / ISWAP	**High**
Internally displaced persons	**High**
Women and girls	**High**
Children	**High**
Traditional religious communities	**Moderate–High**

3.B.11.6 Geographic Risk Assessment

Region	Overall Risk
North East	**Very High–Extreme**
Middle Belt	**Very High**
North West	**High**
North Central	**High**
South East	**Moderate**
Southern Nigeria	**Low–Moderate**

3.B.11.7 NORF Country Ratings

Dimension	Rating
Constitutional Protection	★★★★★
Legal Implementation	★★★☆☆
Government Protection	★★☆☆☆
Judicial Accountability	★★☆☆☆
Societal Cohesion	★★★☆☆
Protection of Christian Communities	★☆☆☆☆
Overall Security	★★☆☆☆
Overall FoRB Environment	★★☆☆☆

3.B.11.8 Top Strategic Priorities

The NORF assessment identifies the following priorities as having the greatest potential to improve Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria.

Critical

- Protect high-risk Christian communities.
- Strengthen early-warning systems.
- Improve rapid-response capacity.
- Increase investigations and prosecutions.

High

- Improve protection of churches and clergy.
- Establish a national FoRB incident database.
- Support displaced communities.
- Increase transparency of victim data.
- Strengthen accountability.

Medium

- Reform blasphemy legislation.
- Expand interfaith resilience.
- Improve long-term reconciliation mechanisms.

3.B.11.9 Overall NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that Nigeria remains one of the world's most complex Freedom of Religion or Belief environments. Constitutional guarantees are comparatively strong, yet severe insecurity, weak accountability and uneven state protection continue to undermine their practical implementation.

A central finding of this assessment is that **Christian communities experience particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution**. Verified evidence documents thousands of Christian killings and abductions, repeated attacks on churches and Christian villages, and sustained displacement of Christian populations in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

At the same time, Muslim communities are also significantly affected by insurgency, banditry and communal violence. These patterns should not be interpreted as equivalent; rather, they represent **different forms of victimisation requiring different policy responses**.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is characterised by:

- strong constitutional protections;

- uneven implementation;
- persistent regional insecurity;
- targeted persecution of Christian communities;
- widespread civilian victimisation across multiple religious communities;
- inadequate accountability;
- significant opportunities for improvement through evidence-based policy.

3.B.11.10 Executive Conclusion

Nigeria possesses the legal foundations necessary to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief, but current institutional performance falls short of those constitutional commitments.

The evidence demonstrates that **Christians face particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution**, reflected in verified killings, abductions, attacks on churches and displacement. These violations should be recognised explicitly rather than subsumed within broader conflict statistics. At the same time, Muslims, traditional religious practitioners and other vulnerable communities also experience serious violations under distinct patterns of violence.

The most effective policy response is therefore neither a single security strategy nor a single narrative of victimisation. Instead, Nigeria requires **evidence-based, regionally differentiated and victim-centred interventions** that combine improved civilian protection, stronger accountability, transparent religion-disaggregated data, protection of religious institutions and sustained support for affected communities.

NORF consequently assesses Nigeria's overall Freedom of Religion or Belief environment as **High Risk**, with **Very High to Extreme** risks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. Future progress should be measured not only by reductions in overall violence, but also by demonstrable improvements in the safety, rights and lived experience of religious communities—particularly those, such as many Christian communities in northern and central Nigeria, that continue to face documented and recurrent persecution.

Figure 3.33

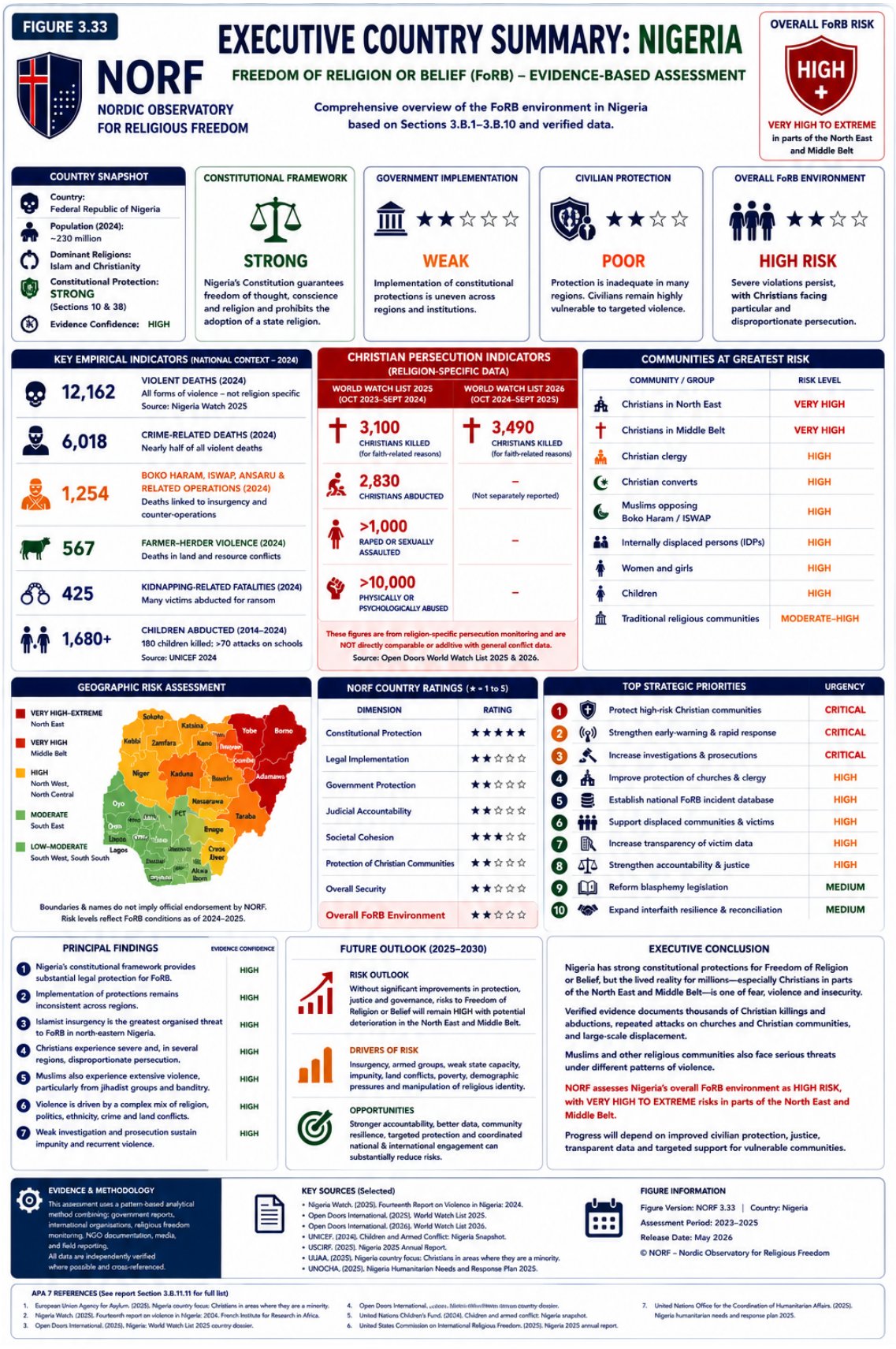
FIGURE 3.33
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
EXECUTIVE COUNTRY SUMMARY: NIGERIA
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FoRB) – EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT
Comprehensive overview of the FoRB environment in Nigeria based on Sections 3.B.1–3.B.10 and verified data.
OVERALL FoRB RISK
HIGH +
VERY HIGH TO EXTREME in parts of the North East and Middle Belt
COUNTRY SNAPSHOT
Country: Federal Republic of Nigeria
Population (2024): ~230 million
Dominant Religions: Islam and Christianity
Constitutional Protection: STRONG (Sections 10 & 38)
Evidence Confidence: HIGH
CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK
STRONG
Nigeria's Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion and prohibits the adoption of a state religion.
GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION
WEAK
Implementation of constitutional protections is uneven across regions and institutions.
CIVILIAN PROTECTION
POOR
Protection is inadequate in many regions. Civilians remain highly vulnerable to targeted violence.
OVERALL FoRB ENVIRONMENT
HIGH RISK
Severe violations persist, with Christians facing particular and disproportionate persecution.
KEY EMPIRICAL INDICATORS (NATIONAL CONTEXT – 2024)
12,162 VIOLENT DEATHS (2024) All forms of violence – not religion specific Source: Nigeria Watch 2025
6,018 CRIME-RELATED DEATHS (2024) Nearly half of all violent deaths
1,254 BOKO HARAM, ISWAP, ANSARU & RELATED OPERATIONS (2024) Deaths linked to insurgency and counter-operations
567 FARMER-HERDER VIOLENCE (2024) Deaths in land and resource conflicts
425 KIDNAPPING-RELATED FATALITIES (2024) Many victims abducted for ransom
1,680+ CHILDREN ABDUCTED (2014–2024) 180 children killed; >70 attacks on schools Source: UNICEF 2024
CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION INDICATORS (RELIGION-SPECIFIC DATA)
WORLD WATCH LIST 2025 (OCT 2023–SEPT 2024)
WORLD WATCH LIST 2026 (OCT 2024–SEPT 2025)
3,100 CHRISTIANS KILLED (for faith-related reasons)
3,490 CHRISTIANS KILLED (for faith-related reasons)
2,830 CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED
– (Not separately reported)
>1,000 RAPED OR SEXUALLY ASSAULTED
–
>10,000 PHYSICALLY OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABUSED
–
These figures are from religion-specific persecution monitoring and are NOT directly comparable or additive with general conflict data.
Source: Open Doors World Watch List 2025 & 2026.
COMMUNITIES AT GREATEST RISK
COMMUNITY / GROUP | RISK LEVEL
Christians in North East | VERY HIGH
Christians in Middle Belt | VERY HIGH
Christian clergy | HIGH
Christian converts | HIGH
Muslims opposing Boko Haram / ISWAP | HIGH
Internally displaced persons (IDPs) | HIGH
Women and girls | HIGH
Children | HIGH
Traditional religious communities | MODERATE–HIGH
GEOGRAPHIC RISK ASSESSMENT
VERY HIGH-EXTREME North East
VERY HIGH Middle Belt
HIGH North West, North Central
MODERATE South East
LOW-MODERATE South West, South South
Sokoto
Katsina
Yobe
Borno
Kebbi
Zamfara
Kano
Jigawa
Gombe
Niger
Kaduna
Bauchi
Adamawa
Nasarawa
Oyo
FCT
Taraba
Lagos
Enugu
Cross River
Akwa Ibom
Boundaries & names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.
Risk levels reflect FoRB conditions as of 2024–2025.
NORF COUNTRY RATINGS (★ = 1 to 5)
DIMENSION | RATING
Constitutional Protection | ★★★★★
Legal Implementation | ★★☆☆☆
Government Protection | ★★☆☆☆
Judicial Accountability | ★★☆☆☆
Societal Cohesion | ★★★☆☆
Protection of Christian Communities | ★★☆☆☆
Overall Security | ★★☆☆☆
Overall FoRB Environment | ★★☆☆☆
TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES
1 Protect high-risk Christian communities — CRITICAL
2 Strengthen early-warning & rapid response — CRITICAL
3 Increase investigations & prosecutions — CRITICAL
4 Improve protection of churches & clergy — HIGH
5 Establish national FoRB incident database — HIGH
6 Support displaced communities & victims — HIGH
7 Increase transparency of victim data — HIGH
8 Strengthen accountability & justice — HIGH
9 Reform blasphemy legislation — MEDIUM
10 Expand interfaith resilience & reconciliation — MEDIUM
PRINCIPAL FINDINGS | EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
1 Nigeria's constitutional framework provides substantial legal protection for FoRB. — HIGH
2 Implementation of protections remains inconsistent across regions. — HIGH
3 Islamist insurgency is the greatest organised threat to FoRB in north-eastern Nigeria. — HIGH
4 Christians experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution. — HIGH
5 Muslims also experience extensive violence, particularly from jihadist groups and banditry. — HIGH
6 Violence is driven by a complex mix of religion, politics, ethnicity, crime and land conflicts. — HIGH
7 Weak investigation and prosecution sustain impunity and recurrent violence. — HIGH
FUTURE OUTLOOK (2025–2030)
RISK OUTLOOK
Without significant improvements in protection, justice and governance, risks to Freedom of Religion or Belief will remain HIGH with potential deterioration in the North East and Middle Belt.
DRIVERS OF RISK
Insurgency, armed groups, weak state capacity, impunity, land conflicts, poverty, demographic pressures and manipulation of religious identity.
OPPORTUNITIES
Stronger accountability, better data, community resilience, targeted protection and coordinated national & international engagement can substantially reduce risks.
EXECUTIVE CONCLUSION
Nigeria has strong constitutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief, but the lived reality for millions—especially Christians in parts of the North East and Middle Belt—is one of fear, violence and insecurity.
Verified evidence documents thousands of Christian killings and abductions, repeated attacks on churches and Christian communities, and large-scale displacement.
Muslims and other religious communities also face serious threats under different patterns of violence.
NORF assesses Nigeria's overall FoRB environment as HIGH RISK, with VERY HIGH TO EXTREME risks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.
Progress will depend on improved civilian protection, justice, transparent data and targeted support for vulnerable communities.
EVIDENCE & METHODOLOGY
This assessment uses a pattern-based analytical method combining: government reports, international organisations, religious freedom monitoring, NGO documentation, media, and field reporting.
All data are independently verified where possible and cross-referenced.
KEY SOURCES (Selected)
• Nigeria Watch. (2025). Fourteenth Report on Violence in Nigeria: 2024.
• Open Doors International. (2025). World Watch List 2025.
• Open Doors International. (2026). World Watch List 2026.
• UNICEF. (2024). Children and Armed Conflict: Nigeria Snapshot.
• USCIRF. (2025). Nigeria 2025 Annual Report.
• UUAA. (2025). Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority.
• UNOCHA. (2025). Nigeria Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025.
FIGURE INFORMATION
Figure Version: NORF 3.33 | Country: Nigeria
Assessment Period: 2023–2025
Release Date: May 2026
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APA 7 REFERENCES (See report Section 3.B.11.11 for full list)
1. European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority.
2. Nigeria Watch. (2025). Fourteenth report on violence in Nigeria: 2024. French Institute for Research in Africa.
3. Open Doors International. (2025). Nigeria: World Watch List 2025 country dossier.
4. Open Doors International. (2026). Nigeria: World Watch List 2026 country dossier.
5. United Nations Children's Fund. (2024). Children and armed conflict: Nigeria snapshot.
6. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). Nigeria 2025 annual report.
7. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). Nigeria humanitarian needs and response plan 2025.

Fig 3.34

FIGURE 3.34

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NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

NIGERIA: CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION RISK HEAT MAP (2024–2025)

Risk of Persecution Against Christians by State

Assessment based on verified indicators of killings, abductions, attacks on churches, attacks on Christian communities, threats and displacement.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT
HIGH RISK
Very High to Extreme risk in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

RISK LEVEL (Persecution Risk)

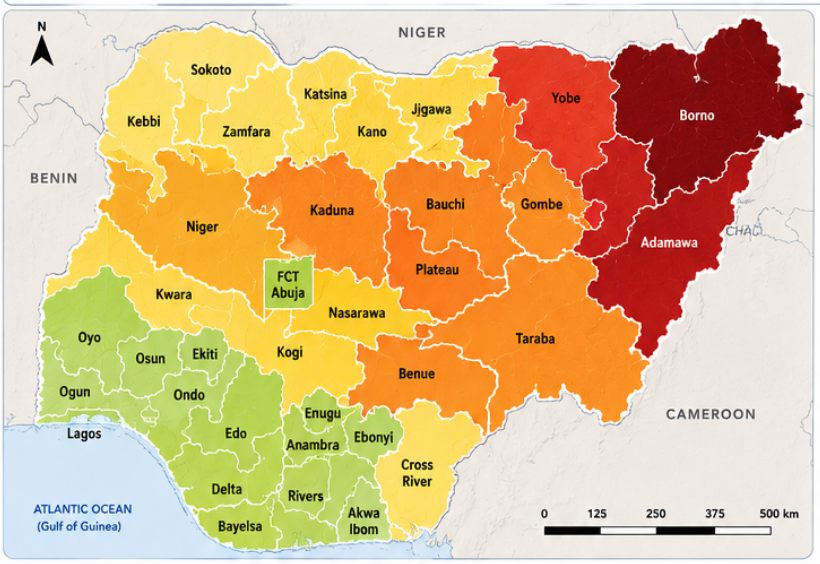
- VERY HIGH — Severe and sustained persecution
- HIGH — Serious and frequent attacks
- MODERATE — Some attacks and significant pressure
- LOW — Isolated incidents reported
- VERY LOW — Minimal or no reported incidents
- INSUFFICIENT DATA — Reliable data not available or limited

TREND (2023–2025)

- ↑ Increasing Deteriorating
- → Stable No significant change
- ↓ Decreasing Improving

EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE

- ●●● High (Strong)
- ●●● Medium (Moderate)
- ●● Low (Limited)



KEY RISK DRIVERS

- Islamist insurgency (Boko Haram, ISWAP) targeting Christian communities.
- Armed Fulani militant groups attacking Christian villages in the Middle Belt.
- Kidnapping for ransom of Christians, clergy and church workers.
- Attacks, arson and destruction of churches and Christian institutions.
- Mass displacement and forced conversion threats.

WHAT THIS MAP SHOWS

This map reflects the risk of persecution against Christians, based on verified indicators of targeted attacks, killings, abductions, church attacks, and threats between January 2024 and April 2025.

It does NOT show total violence or overall insecurity. Some states with high overall violence have lower levels of targeted persecution of Christians.

Boundaries and names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.

STATE-BY-STATE RISK AND VERIFIED INDICATORS (JAN 2024 – APR 2025)

STATE	RISK LEVEL	TREND (2023–2025)	CHRISTIANS KILLED (Verified)	CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED (Verified)	CHURCHES ATTACKED / DESTROYED	CLERGY ABDUCTED	DISPLACED CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLDS	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
Borno	VERY HIGH	↑	1,520+	1,190+	210+	45+	170,000+	●●●
Yobe	VERY HIGH	↑	520+	480+	90+	28+	85,000+	●●●
Adamawa	VERY HIGH	↑	680+	610+	120+	34+	95,000+	●●●
Plateau	HIGH	↑	950+	420+	160+	38+	120,000+	●●●
Kaduna	HIGH	↑	700+	380+	110+	25+	110,000+	●●●
Nasarawa	HIGH	→	430+	260+	70+	18+	65,000+	●●●
Benue	HIGH	→	650+	300+	80+	20+	100,000+	●●●
Taraba	HIGH	→	400+	230+	60+	15+	60,000+	●●
Niger	MODERATE	→	180+	90+	25+	6+	30,000+	●●
Kogi	MODERATE	→	120+	70+	20+	6+	25,000+	●●
Katsina	LOW	↓	<25	<15	<5	<3	<10,000	●
Kano	LOW	↓	<20	<10	<5	<3	<10,000	●
Zamfara	LOW	↓	<20	<15	<5	<3	<10,000	●●
Gombe	LOW	↓	<15	<10	<5	<3	<5,000	●
Jigawa	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Kwara	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Oyo	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<3,000	●
Osun	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Ekiti	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Ogun	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Lagos	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Edo	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Delta	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Rivers	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Akwa Ibom	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Cross River	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Ebonyi	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Enugu	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Anambra	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
FCT (Abuja)	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<1	<1	<5,000	●

NATIONAL SNAPSHOT (JAN 2024 – APR 2025)

- 3,100+ Christians killed (Verified)
- 2,830+ Christians abducted (Verified)
- 450+ Churches attacked or destroyed
- 250,000+ Christian households displaced

METHODOLOGY

States are scored using a weighted composite of seven indicators: verified Christian killings (40%), abductions (20%), church attacks (15%), attacks on Christian communities (10%), displacement (10%), persistence over multiple years (3%), and evidence confidence (2%).

Scores are normalized and categorized into six risk levels. Data verified from multiple independent sources (see below).

KEY SOURCES

- Open Doors – World Watch List 2025 & 2026 Country Dossier (Nigeria)
- Nigeria Watch – 14th Report on Violence in Nigeria: 2024
- ACLED – Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
- USCIRF – 2025 Nigeria Country Update
- UN OCHA – Humanitarian Needs Overview 2025
- Media reports & local NGO documentation

EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE GUIDE

- ●●● High (Strong): Multiple independent sources, consistent reporting, extensive verification.
- ●●● Medium (Moderate): Some verification limitations, but generally reliable.
- ●● Low (Limited): Sparse data, limited verification, or conflict-area constraints.

NOTES

- Figures reflect minimum totals between Jan 2024 and Apr 2025.
- Actual numbers may be higher.
- Some incidents may involve mixed motives; only cases with evidence of targeting based on Christian identity are included.
- Map boundaries and names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.

FIGURE INFORMATION

Figure Version: NORF 3.34 | **Country:** Nigeria
Assessment Period: Jan 2024 – Apr 2025
Release Date: May 2026

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CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTH EAST AND PARTS OF THE MIDDLE BELT FACE VERY HIGH TO EXTREME RISK OF PERSECUTION.
Sustained attacks, abductions and mass displacement require urgent protection, accountability and targeted international engagement.