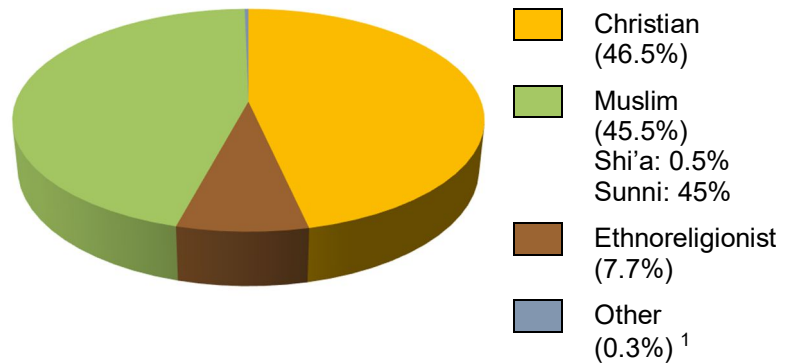


NIGERIA



| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| Area: 923,768 km ² | Population²: 181.6 million | Political system: Democracy / Autocracy ³ | Major Language(s): English, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), Fulani ⁴ |
|---|---|--|--|

Legal framework on freedom of religion and its current application

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa – with more than 180 million people – remains in a state of unrest. The Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram (which, translated, means essentially “Western education is a sin”) once again stepped up the number and intensity of its attacks against the civilian population during the reporting period. Meanwhile, Nigeria’s neighbouring countries to the north-east, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, are increasingly under threat. To date, President Muhammadu Buhari has taken steps towards delivering his main campaign promise: to energetically combat terrorism.⁵ According to political analyst Remi Adekoya: “Nigeria’s military has been progressively pushing the jihadis from territories they once controlled, forcing them on the defensive. However, he has by no means ‘crushed’ Boko Haram, which still maintains the capability to launch attacks on soft targets.”⁶ Boko Haram continues to raid villages and refugee facilities on both sides of the Nigerian border, robbing, raping, abusing children and murdering. The existence of a large, cross-border theocratic militia in West Africa remains the central obstacle to development in the region and is threatening the peaceful coexistence of religions that have traditionally maintained good relations with one another.

Nigeria is a federal republic based on the model of the United States of America. Its official motto is “Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress”. The state is headed by a President, similar to that in the U.S. or France. Since May 2015, the President has been the former army general, Mohammad Buhari. A Muslim, Buhari was head of state once previously, from 1983 until 1985, as the head of the military junta that took power in a military coup. The Vice-President is Yemi Osinbajo, a Christian (a member of the Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God).⁷ These religious affiliations reflect the country’s broad religious spectrum which naturally rotates with each presidential election.

As is the case in many African countries, in Nigeria there is a vast gulf between what is enshrined in the constitution and what happens in practice in the country. The principal reasons for this are that:

- a. the real power often lies in the hands of the minor kings (Obas) who have the final say on the ground;
- b. the tribal princedoms, cemented under British colonial rule (1860-1960), in reality rarely accept the laws imposed by the central government;
- c. religious and party political rivalries, often expressed through 'old clan score settling', make it considerably more difficult to implement workable political measures, and
- d. the high levels of corruption within all political classes – and in some cases religious communities, too – quite blatantly frustrate the principle of an 'orientation to the common good'.

There is an ongoing, nationwide discussion as to whether democracy is really the political form best suited for the most populous nation in Africa. The following should be kept in mind as well: this complicated system – which clearly suffers from a host of deficiencies – has nonetheless helped ensure that Nigeria, a country with so many different peoples, cultures, languages and faiths, is still intact nearly 60 years after gaining its independence.

Because religion has been a source of conflict in Nigeria for such a long time, there are no official figures on religious affiliation. Both Christians and Muslims claim to constitute the majority in the country. The dominant Muslim group is Sunni Islam, which is broken down along various Sufi paths, including Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyyah. There are a growing number of Salafists (such as those of the groups of Shi'a and Izala), as well as a small number of Ahmadi Muslims.

Christianity in Nigeria consists of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant and Pentecostal churches, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are also Jehovah's Witnesses as well as Jews and members of the Bahá'í faith.⁸

The religious leader of the Muslims is the Sultan of Sokoto. Nigeria is a member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Important Muslim groups are Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). Christians of all denominations are united in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the Co-Presidents of which are the Presidents of NSCIA and CAN, tries to promote interfaith understanding in the face of religiously motivated violence.

About 25 million people are Catholics, the largest Christian community in Nigeria.⁹ The first contacts with Christian priests date to the year 1470.¹⁰ Pope Paul III founded the Diocese of São Tomé and Príncipe in 1543. The religious clergy of the Society of African Missions (SMA) settled in Lagos in 1860, as did the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, known as the Holy Ghost Fathers or Spiritans (CSsP), beginning in 1885. In 1960, Lagos became the headquarters of the Apostolic Delegation of Central Western Africa. Following the Biafra War of 1967 to 1970, in which most foreign missionaries were expelled from the country, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and the Vatican were restored in 1976. In 1982, Pope Saint John Paul II visited Nigeria. Despite being the largest Christian denomination in the country as a whole, the Catholic Church is a minority in the north, where most people are Muslims.

There is a high proportion of Catholics in the Igbo settlement areas in the south of Nigeria. Since the introduction of *Shari'a* law in parts of northern Nigeria in the year 2000, the country has witnessed a substantial increase in the persecution of Christians.

Since 2009, sectarian violence has issued particularly from Boko Haram in the north-east. Indeed Islamist terror is not confined to Christian communities alone. Even moderate Muslims are among the victims: believers who are not willing to wield Islamist hatred against people of other faiths. The group has now allied itself with the Islamist organisation Daesh (ISIS), which is terrorising the Middle East and has established its base for North Africa in Libya throughout 2015. As early as 2014 then President Goodluck Jonathon reported that over 13,000 people had been killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the number has risen since.¹¹

Incidents

Given the large number of often bloody attacks by Boko Haram, which have largely although by no means exclusively targeted at Christian communities and institutions, it is hardly possible to give a complete overview of the acts of violence. The abduction of so-called 'Chibok girls' awakened great sympathy both within the Nigerian population and internationally. On the night of 14th-15th April 2014, Boko Haram militants attacked the Government Girls School in Chibok, a city in the Northeast of Nigeria, and took 276 girls into captivity.¹²

In May 2016, Bishop Oliver Dashe Doeme of Maiduguri expressed hopes that the search for victims of Boko Haram would be stepped up. He said: "We need to be aware that there are still many more people in the hands of the terrorists." The bishop was speaking after one of the Chibok girls escaped. Now 19 years of age, Amina Ali Nkek was found by a civilian group in the Sambisa forest area in Borno state, in an area bordering Cameroon. The parents had to identify the traumatised schoolgirl. The young woman had given birth while in captivity; according to media reports, the child was with his mother. The rescued girl reported that six girls had died. 219 still remain in the hands of terrorists¹³

In mid-February 2016, in the state of Borno in the east of Nigeria, up to 30 people were killed in two attacks. The Boko Haram attacks were directed at a mosque and a village. Nearby, just days prior to the attacks, the Islamists had killed six passengers aboard a minibus. Attacks such as these show that Boko Haram is increasingly targeting members of the Muslim faith. With this, the terrorists are following an unscrupulous strategy, using acts of violence as a warning to all of the forces of moderation not to demonstrate solidarity with the victims. Those who act otherwise risk becoming targets themselves.

Often, the attackers exhibit extreme brutality. According to eye-witnesses, children were burned alive in an attack carried out in early February 2016. Shortly before that, a boy committed a suicide bombing. According to information by the army, Boko Haram militants armed with firearms and explosives staged an attack on a village in north-eastern Nigeria.¹⁴

There are now 2.5 million displaced people in Nigeria. An impression of the dramatic situation was offered in a report by Father Patrick Tor Alumiki, Communications Officer of the Diocese of Abuja (Abuja is also the national capital of the Republic of Nigeria). In February 2016, Father Alumiki explained that, while the military had attacked Boko Haram in the north-eastern state of Borno, Boko Haram was preparing for new attacks. He said: "Now there are lots of people fleeing Borno. There are thousands of people here around the city of Abuja in search of a place to sleep. The Church is trying in whatever way it can to raise food for the people, as well as clothing and medicines. We try to make the best of this situation, for their sake."¹⁵

Boko Haram attacks have grown less frequent. The organisation did not stage any further attacks on big cities, opting instead to pillage small villages where they committed various crimes including murder. The reason given for the change is the successful military campaign against the organisations carried out by President Buhari's government.

In view of reports such as Fr Alumiki's, it is surprising that President Buhari declared in December 2015 that Boko Haram was "technically" defeated. However, the horrific attacks continue, but they generate less and less attention internationally. It is almost as if the world has grown accustomed to reports of terrorism in Nigeria. International interest in attacks by Boko Haram across the border in Niger, Chad and Cameroon is waning as well. To give one example: in February 2015, Boko Haram attacked the city of Diffa in Niger for the first time but was repulsed by the army. There are currently large numbers of refugees who have fled Nigeria housing either in camps in the Diffa and Bosso region or living alongside the local population in village communities. More than a year later, in May 2016, the security situation has deteriorated significantly. According to the UNHCR, suicide bombings in refugee facilities are rising. Two large marketplaces were closed in April 2016 for fear of attacks. There is a curfew in effect in Diffa daily from 7pm until 5am.¹⁶ Karl Steinacker, UNHCR representative in Niger, said: "The security situation in the Diffa region remains tense and unpredictable." He added: "More and more locals and refugees are asking to be brought to places further away from the border – out of fear of the same kinds of Boko Haram attacks in Niger that have become common in Nigeria."¹⁷

The conflict is however spreading in the south as well as the north. What is still often perceived as a land conflict among settled farmers and wandering shepherds is rather religiously motivated violence in south-eastern Nigeria. 20 people died on 25th April 2016 in massacres in the village of Nimbo. All through the following month, there were numerous attacks on local farmers there. The attacks are attributed to the nomads of the Fulani tribe. It is believed that these nomads were moving south due to the ongoing drought in the north. There are concerns that Boko Haram fighters could join them, expanding their presence in the south.¹⁸

Following the massacres in south-eastern Nigeria, Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, the Archbishop of Abuja, complained that some parties to the conflict were deliberately fanning the "flames of discord and of hatred". The cardinal said that it was becoming increasingly difficult to preach unity and love at a time when others were advocating a clash between Christians and Muslims. He added that it was the government's responsibility to bring murderous nomads, kidnappers and armed gangs to justice.¹⁹

On 3rd May 2016, the parliamentary group of the European People's Party hosted a conference on religious fundamentalism in the European Parliament. The conference highlighted the problem of attacks by extremists who have moved to south of the country, showing that Christians were now frequently targeted. The long-term consequence of this could be that more and more farmers will find themselves unable to cultivate their land, threatening supply shortages and even famine and mass migration.²⁰

Prospects for freedom of religion

It is difficult to predict how the situation will develop for religious groups in Nigeria. For one, President Buhari seems to be serious about the fight against what has now become cross-border Islamist terrorism; in addition, there is no indication that Boko Haram is on the verge of giving up. An important factor will be how the international community responds to the Nigerian crisis. There are at least statements of intent. In Abuja in mid-May 2016, representatives of the U.S., the EU countries and the countries bordering Nigeria agreed to bolster their support of Nigeria's fight against terrorism. The UK intends to finance the training of soldiers, among other things. France's President Hollande announced that his country would do more to share intelligence with the Nigerian authorities.²¹

Political analyst Michel Galy told Vatican Radio that Boko Haram's communications have become increasingly international and sophisticated. In some cases, the military attacks in recent months have succeeded in weakening and repelling the militias, but militarily speaking, he believes Nigeria is unable to combat Boko Haram and that the Nigerian Army is too weak and often corrupt. He stated: "[The Nigerian Army] is not sufficiently equipped to wage war on this terrain. It has great difficulty implementing the President's declarations of intent, even though Nigeria is one of the richest countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. The new President Muhammadu Buhari doesn't like to hear calls for massive expansion in international aid from the West and the old colonial powers, either."²² France is still not actively involved in the fight against Boko Haram – in spite of a heavy military presence in the region, with military bases in Gabon and the Central African Republic. The African military alliances are said to become frequently entangled in nationalism, Galy pointed out, and this impedes cooperation, particularly between Anglophone and Francophone countries.²³

For all the pain and breakdown of trust, particularly that experienced by Christians but also by moderate Muslims in the past decades, for all of the attempts to assert Muslim domination through imposition of *Shari'a*, Nigeria remains at heart a country where co-existence of peoples and religions has a long and positive tradition. Today, too, there are repeated calls for reconciliation and gestures of peaceful cohabitation. For instance, many religious leaders publicly support religious tolerance and non-denominational methods of conflict resolution. To give one example: in August 2014, an inter-faith summit was held to which Catholic Cardinal John Onaiyekan and the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar, issued joint invitations.²⁴ The shared determination to preserve and positively shape the coexistence of religions in the multi-ethnic state of Nigeria remains firmly established in the minds of many Church and state leaders – in spite of all the violence, in spite of the hatred, and in spite of all the vested interests that often dominate political life in Nigeria.

¹ 2010 figures – Association of Religion Data Archives

² CIA, The World Factbook 2016, estimate July 2015

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13949550>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36384237>

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/28/muhammadu-buhari-nigeria-problems-boko-haram-corruption>

⁷ <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/12/meet-buharis-running-mate-prof-yemi-osibajo/>

⁸ US State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁹ <https://www.missio-hilft.de/de/laender-projekte/afrika/nigeria-1/factsheet.html>

¹⁰ cf. http://bautz.de/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=256&catid=84

¹¹ <https://africacheck.org/reports/have-13000-people-been-killed-in-nigerias-insurgency-the-claim-is-broadly-correct/>

¹² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35979157>

¹³ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/19/nigeria_hoffnung_bei_suche_nach_boko-haram-geiseln/1230916

¹⁴ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/02/02/nigeria_kirche_als_einzige_hilfe_f%C3%BCr_menschen/1205374

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/11/nigeria_boko_haram_wandert_gen_s%C3%BCden/1228991 as well as <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/05/herdsmen-kill-royal-father-nephew-in-kaduna/>

¹⁹ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/11/nigeria_boko_haram_wan-dert_gen_s%C3%BCden/1228991

²⁰ Unpublished paper: 'Humanitarian Crises in the Air in Nigeria: Threats from Boko Haram. An Intervention presented at the Conference on Religious radicalisation: The case of Boko Haram and Terrorism in Nigeria organised by EPP Group in the European Parliament, Brussels, 3rd May 2016 in the European Parliament by Rev. Fr. George Odafe, a priest of Kaduna Archdiocese and Doctoral Candidate, Gregorian University, Rome'

²¹

http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/16/nigeria_%E2%80%9Ef%C3%BCr_einen_selbstmordanschlag_braucht_es_nicht_viel/1230172

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ U S State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014