

## IMPACT OF CHURCH PERSECUTION IN NORTHERN PART OF NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The study examines the impact of persecution on humanity, especially Christians in Northern Nigeria. The paper argues that Christians in Nigeria are being persecuted by their Muslim neighbors and compatriots. Their latest offensive is carried out by Islamic fundamentalists whose aim is to Islamise Nigeria. The insidious and elevated persecutions used have badly affected both Northern and Southern Christians in different human endeavours in Northern Nigeria. It has resulted to leaving many as widows, widowers, childless, orphans, extinction and set back to the growth of Christianity in Northern Nigeria. The paper also tries to document the recent attacks carried out in Northern Nigeria, from 2020 to date. The recent attacks on the plateau are worth noting especially in central Zone (Mangu, Bokkos and Barkin Ladi Local government areas) in Plateau state where many lives are lost and properties destroyed between May to October this year 2023. The objective of this research is to find out the origin, causes and impact of persecution and suggests ways for peaceful coexistence through deliberate actions by the government and dialogue through religious tolerance in Northern Nigeria. The solutions to the problem of persecution in Northern Nigeria and the recommendations suggested may assist to arrive at the desired goal of tolerance and coexistence. The method the researcher adopts is a historical method in which the origin, impact and causes of persecutions are clearly investigated for onward suggestions. The findings prove that government should improve on her responsibility of protecting lives and properties, Christians should be more proactive by being vigilant encourage dialogue for peaceful coexistence. The findings will contribute to existing knowledge on peaceful coexistence of humanity. The recommendations will add more value to the work and regards humanity if taken into consideration.*

**Keywords:** Persecution, Church, Northern –Nigeria, Impact

### INTRODUCTION

Persecution is a global phenomenon; it has affected human philosophy of life. It has affected humanity from the perspective of Christian faith in Northern Nigeria which is quite alarming. Nigeria in recent years has an alarming record of religious violence which has resulted to loss of lives and properties especially in Northern Nigeria. The phenomenon has triggered debate

among analysts and commentators as to whether the situation in Nigeria is actually a persecution or civil unrest. The paper seeks to find out why both insidious and elevated forms of persecution against Christians in Northern Nigeria were carried out. The paper also attempts to raise concern on humanity in using religious freedom to become a casualty in the philosophy of life (Uka 2012). Persecution of innocent Christians comes in different forms in Northern Nigeria as follows: Boko-haram, bandits, kidnappers, Fulani herdsmen, and other terrorist groups have surfaced through Islamic religion against Christianity in Northern Nigeria. Christians in Northern Nigeria are treated as second class citizens in which religious freedom is abused. The paper argues that humanity should be treated with high level of respect and honour as created beings by the creator. Destruction of lives and properties which is against the philosophy of life is the order of the day. The paper examines the origin of persecution, the causes, the impact and the solutions to Christian persecution in Northern Nigeria so that there will be religious freedom and tolerance in especially the Northern part of the country. The main source of persecution in Northern Nigeria is Islamic terrorism. It is clearly evident that religious freedom is restricted or violated by Northern Muslims political and religious elites, the Muslims Fulani herdsmen and also by the wide spread culture of political violence upheld by states practices and policies that discriminate against Christians: It is clearly reported that persecution in form of discrimination, restriction, lack religious freedom, mostly come from the Northern region of Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslims with twelve sharia states and seven non sharia states (Ewelina Ochab 4-5, 2020).

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF TERMS:**

In this section, the researcher will clarify the following terms including impact, persecution and Church.

**Impact:** This refers to the force of impression of one thing on another, a significant or major effect (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1999). It means the force or action of one object hitting another, having a strong effect on someone or something, a powerful effect that something new has on a situation or person, countable, usually singular, uncountable, the powerful effect that something has on somebody or something which could be either positive or negative (A.S Hornby, Oxford 1995). Therefore, impact means a force of impression of one thing on another, a powerful effect that something new has happened in a particular situation. To our context, it refers to the negative effect of persecution on the church in Northern Nigeria.

**Persecution:** Persecution comes from the Greek word *dioko* meaning run after, pursue. It literally means to chase, pursue, run after or drive away. It is associated with some people whose intentions are hostile (Collin Brown 805-806, 1977). Persecution deals with harassment and suffering which people and institutions inflict upon others for being different in their world view, faith, culture or race. Persecution seeks to intimidate, silence, punishes and even kill people (Brown and Drapper 1277, 2003).

**Church:** The word ‘church’—from the Greek word ‘ekkaleo’—means to call out. It was a common term for a congregation of the ‘ekkletoi’ those who are called out or assembled in the public affairs of a free state or body of free citizens. A good example is the congregation of Israel, was called an assembly (Acts 7:38). In the New Testament, the term ‘ekklesia’ denotes the community of the redeemed believers in Christ (Dan Kore 5, 2020). The word church, assembly or body of Christ or *ekklesia* means people who assemble or come together to worship God (Awings 12, 2010). Many churches have been destroyed in Northern Nigeria.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF NORTHERN NIGERIA**

It was an autonomous division within Nigeria, distinctly different from the Southern part of the country with independent customs, foreign relations and security structures. In 1962, it acquired the territory of British Northern Cameroons which voted to become a province within Northern Nigeria during the time of Ahmadu Bello in 1962. This is the Northern part of the country Nigeria where persecution has affected Christianity. The church in Northern Nigeria has suffered set back through destruction of lives and properties. Thus this paper examines Christians persecution in Northern Nigeria context (Lwati vol.9, NO1, 2012).

## **ORIGIN OF PERSECUTION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

The origin of Christian persecutions is traced back to Usman Danfodio, Maitatsine and Sardauna of Sokoto in Northern Nigeria. In 1961 late Sardauna of Sokoto formed Jama’at Nasril Islam (JNI) an Islamic movement charged with the responsibility of propagating Islam. This was thought by some people to be a religious wing of political party (Northern people’s congress (NPC) though other Muslims did not accept it (Uka 6, 2012). Religious war persisted even after the war had ended. It came in the form of a religious cold war. The issue of Sharia law was another strategy initiated by Usman Dan Fodio to implement it in the Northern Emirate in order to reform what was initially perceived as the lax practice of Islam among the rulers. Thus the jihad of Usman Dan Fodia led to the establishment of Islamic state base on Sharia law (7, 2012). While the Northern constituent assembly were debating on the matter, Muslims outside tried to make it by force if not accepted, threats and riots were going to make the country ungovernable. Students from Ahmadu Bello concurred to this idea and pleaded for the implementation of the Sharia. Later on protesters kicked against the initiative sensing that it was a way of establishing an Islamic state and secondly, it was a major source of conflict in Nigeria body polity. This also resulted to the prevalent religious political conditions that existed at the time Alhaji Shehu Shagari became the president in the second republic in 1979-1983. Even though it was not included in the constitution, the stage was set for the achievement of the will of ‘‘Allah’’ for effective Islamization of the country (8, 2012).

In December 18-29, 1980, prior to Kano riot outbreak, there had been over thirty violent incidents of religious riots in Northern states. The burning of churches is known in Kano in

October 1982 was an example of an inter religious crises in Northern Nigeria. In 1983-1985, Buhari over threw Shagari, people suffered all over, the religious riot this time was political in nature. When Baban Gida mounted the throne, he registered Nigeria as a member of OIC, that resulted to crises in 1986-1991

During the regime of Obasanjo from 1990-2004, the governor of Zamfara state, Ahmed Yerima introduced the sharia legal system in his state since then several Northern states follow suit. This several riots which led to the destruction of lives and properties in the North (10, 2012).

Christian persecution in Nigeria appeared in different ways. An estimate of thirty million Christians in Northern Nigeria from the largest minority in mainly Muslims environment and are at risk of violent persecution. Romans started the the persecution under Nero in 64 CE after great fire in the city of Rome (James 10 January, 2023).

Another outbreak of persecution or riot were series of violent uprisings instigated by Islamist militants in Northern Nigeria between 1980 and 1985 and represented Northern Nigeria's first major wave of religiously inspired violence under Maitatsine (Adesoji, 2011, pp. 98-119). Thus, believers were being insulted, isolated, beaten, tortured, burned or killed because of their faith.

Persecution started due to some factors which resulted to insidious and elevated forms of persecutions against Christians in Northern Nigeria. It is also understood that inter religious conflicts bordering on struggles over power and resources led to initiation of persecution. These conflicts have been used as vehicles to pursue the objectives of persecution and widen its scope (Open Doors, 2020). The world watch unit acknowledges a researcher in Nigeria whose name remains confidential for security reasons.

The first category of persecution experienced by Christians in northern Nigeria is insidious. This include discrimination in employment, stagnation in promotion in public places of service, suppression of ministries; denial of church building permits; preventing Christian children in public schools from receiving Christian religious studies; admission into tertiary institutions, appointments, imposing the use of veil on Christian female students, denying Christians students places of worship on compuses; forcing young Christian girls into marriage against their wishes and forbidden Christian Boys from having relationship with Muslim girls; maltreating and threatening of converts to Christianity. Such discriminations are common in most of the twelve sharia states in northern Nigeria (Yusufu Turaki 18, 2010).

The second category of persecution against in Northern Nigeria is elevated persecution. Elevated persecution is employed by extremists against Christians in Northern Nigeria. At first it took the form of sporadic violence which involves attacks against Christians, their places of worship and homes. A good example is the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2006 violence against Christians by Muslim group in Maiduguri in reaction to Catoons of Prophet Mohammed published in a Danish news paper in 2005; attacks against Christians in Kano in reactions to America's launching of war in Afghanistan and many other attacks are good examples of elevated

persecution. Both insidious and elevated forms of persecution are tactical ways of weighing down Christianity in Northern Nigeria (B. Salami, 2010, 345-353).

Persecution eclipse allows attacks to be escalated against a religious group during a situation of conflicts; it derives energy from civil conflict, because both insidious and elevated persecutions can be used to pursue the same goal. In Nigeria, civil conflicts have been used to increase pressures on Christian minorities in the Northern region. The elevated persecution has been deployed against Christians to prevent any expansion of Christianity and push it to the background with regards to civil and political rights which was reported on independent news paper: the plight of Syria's Christians (2 November, 2012). It is clearly understood that the origin of persecution could be traced back to insidious and elevated influence instigated by some Islamic violence groups for their selfish religious interest.

It is clearly affirmed that the origin of persecution against Christians in Northern Nigeria is Islamist terrorists as Boko haram and other groups. It has been reported that religious freedom was already restricted or violated by Northern Muslims political and religious elites. The Muslims Fulani herdsmen are part and parcel of the system in which persecution, discrimination and restriction of religious freedom mostly come from the Northern regions of Nigeria where by twelve sharia states are predominantly Muslims, while seven for non sharia state. When president Muhammadu Buhari was sworn in as president on May, 29 2015, he promised to tackle the issue of Islamic extremism posted by Boko Haram, yet it did not work but increased, thus Nigeria was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 2015 global terrorism index from 2000-2016. Terrorism increased by 62 percent in the violent killings of Christians in Northern Nigeria. This is traced back to Boko haram during this period (open doors, 2020).

It is historically evident that the origin of persecution in Northern Nigeria is traced back to Usman Dan fodio in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when he came up with his radical ideology of Jihad with his team and conquered what now constitutes Northern Nigeria. This historical event gave birth to Islamic dominance that has spread across Northern Nigeria. Thus Boko haram, ISWAP and extremist Muslims have couched their ideologies on this historical background to advance Islam by persecuting Christians in Northern Nigeria (Kukah, 2023, 5).

## **CAUSES OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION**

1. Christianity—Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal— is growing dramatically in what is often called the Global South. Such growth is only possible because Christians actively evangelize, sharing the gospel of salvation with others. This missionary zeal is seen as a threat and directs attention towards Christians.

2. Christianity is growing rapidly in some of the most dangerous areas of the world, particularly in parts of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and even in the Middle East. In these volatile areas, any disruption of the fragile status quo is potentially disastrous and Christians are suffering because of it, more specifically Northern part of Nigeria.

3. Christianity is often seen as a form of Western imperialism and identified with “the West.” This makes Christians a natural target for many nationalist movements. Nationalism invariably seeks to unify the nation by excluding minorities. They create unity through hate and Christians, who live for another kingdom, are often the target of this nationalist hatred. An example of this is extreme Hindu nationalism which targets Christians as anti-Indian and even their Muslims Brothers against Christians in Northern Nigeria.

4. Christians are often at the forefront of promoting human rights and democracy as well as opposing violence, corruption, and exploitation of the poor. As such, they are often targeted by the powerful, whether governments or mob groups, who don't hesitate to use violence or other forces of coercion to get what they want. For example, the Latin American drug lords who murder Catholic priests and other Christian leaders because they are the only ones defending the rights of the poor, Northern Nigeria is also a good that Christians are targeted.

5. Christians have their ultimate allegiance to the Kingdom of God which is not of this world. As such, they are viewed with suspicion by totalitarian governments who, as their name suggests, want total control over the bodies and souls of the people. This is the reason behind much of the persecution in places like China and even more so in North Korea and Northern Nigeria.

6. Christians, on the whole, reject violence and retribution. Persecution invariably deals with oppression of the weak or in the case of Christians, because of their faith.

7. Christians are persecuted because Christ is persecuted. Satan “knows that his time is short” and so, unable to get to Christ or His Mother (Revelation 12:12), he makes war “on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.” (Revelation 12:17). This is the hidden reality behind all persecutions. The world and the devil continue to persecute Christ through His people (cf. Acts 9:4-5) just as Christ said they would: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” (John 15:20)

It's important to understand the social, historical and political reasons why Christians are being persecuted. Understanding them more fully might be able to help us reduce persecution. We must do whatever we can to protect our Christian brothers and sisters, not just in providing short-term relief but helping to build a global culture of religious freedom.

At the same time, we can not lose sight of the fact that the real enemy here ultimately isn't the terrorist with the gun or the bureaucrat with the agenda. They need our prayers and our love (Ignitutum, 2023).

## **IMPACT OF PERSECUTION**

The church in the Northern part of Nigeria has suffered setback as a result of persecution from different violence groups from Islamic faith. This persecution of Christians has affected the church in diverse ways.

Terrorists activities of Boko Haram and ISWAP have affected the Christians communities. There are cases of attacks by Fulani herdsmen in some communities like Suntai village in Taraba state. Forceful conversion of rural Christian minority communities is ongoing. About 200 houses were burnt on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> march 2022 as a result of attack by Fulani Militia in Agbam chiefdom, Kaura local government of Kaduna state.

In the same Kaduna state, bandits have attacked and displaced over 500 people in villages like: Tamal, Zangon Tamal, Zangon Tama II, Dillalai Igaga and many others. In Warji local government, Bauchi state, violence erupted against Christians on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2022 as a result of an alleged blasphemous statement against Islam by 40 years old lady, Rhoda Jatau. That resulted to the burning of 13 houses and destruction of shops belonging to Christians. Thus Christians have been targeted both in terms of marginalization, exclusion and physical violence because of their faith (TVC News, 2022). In Benue state, Fulani herdsmen attacked communities of Guma and Tiortyu local government areas on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2022, more than 23 persons killed, after two weeks three people including a pastor were murdered by the same Fulani herdsmen on the 29<sup>th</sup> march 2022 at Waku village (channels Television, 2022). Christians in the North western region of Nigeria are victims of mob actions. Report show that between 2019 and 2020, more than 190 people were murdered in Sokoto as a result of blasphemy. In June 2016, an angry mob in Kano beheaded a Christian woman Bridget Agbahwe for allegedly blaspheming prophet Mohammed. The most recent of this mob was the killing of a Christian lady, Deborah Yakubu from Rapa local government area of Kebbi state, an NCE student, she was stoned and burnt to death on the 12<sup>th</sup> may, 2022 (All Africa 2021, 2022).

The impact of persecution is deeply felt in the church in Northern Nigeria. Seven priests in Northwest of Nigeria were kidnapped in different incidences and one died as a result. Father Joseph of Saint Monica catholic church in Kauru LGA was kidnaped on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Father Joseph Aketeh of ST John catholic church Kaduna south LGA, was kidnapped on the 8<sup>th</sup> march, 2022 and many others. Father Joseph died in the custody of this people on the 11<sup>th</sup> may 2022 after spending two months. The first reason is to extort money from the church by holding religious leaders as hostages until ransom is paid; Secondly, it is out of persecution against Christians (12-13, 2023).

Documentation incidents of attacks within July 1 to September, 30, 2023, by Boko Haram and ISWAP are as follows: in Northeast, 154 people died, 64 people died in North central by Fulani herdsmen attacks and in the Northwest, a total of 127 persons were killed within the period of documentation. Comparative analysis show that Northeast people were killed, more than other regions. Thus Boko haram; Fulani herdsmen and Bandits have a huge impact on the lives of victims (Kukah 14-15, 2023). The analysis so far depicts that persecution has affected the church to a large extend, the impact is negatively felt. In the North central, plateau and Benue are the epic centers of Fulani attacks. These attacks exist because of religious motives and attempts to grab the fertile lands in the region. The persecution through these violent groups have affected Christians in the regions. Beside, the open violence, systematic persecution faced by Christians working with the government, students in public institutions, business Men and

women in states like Zamfara and Sokoto face these challenges. Two categories of atrocities are committed against Christians that are worthy of note are the violent aspects of persecution and the systematic which is non-violent but approach to Christians by individuals in key positions that bridge Christians fundamental rights concerning freedom of worship, acquisitions of lands access to equal opportunity. Destruction of lives and properties is very common. Herdsmen killed about 60 people in Taraba and displaced 120,000 in Taraba state, all in the name of claiming and expansion of Islamic Territory (the Imbue newspaper 2022). Some clear references to Christian persecution by Islamic fundamentalist in Northern Nigeria worthy of note in history are as follows:

Vanguard 31 may, 2013, Nigeria: Boko haram killed Christians. CAN raised alarm on continues killing of Christians and burning of churches by Islamic sect Boko Haram in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states are quite alarming. It was reported also that Rev. Luka Bazigila and a member of COCIN by name Yohanna who attended Christian fellowship were killed in Borno state. On the 26<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed three Christians in church premises in Jos; on April 8, 2013, Boko Haram killed 36 people and wounded dozens outside of a church in Kaduna on Easter day; On 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2012, Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 15 in an attack in Bauchi, October 28, 2012 Boko Haram killed 8 and wounded over 100; In November 25, 2012, Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 30 persons in St. Andrew protestant church in Kaduna; In December 24, 2012, Boko Haram killed Pastor and members four others at COCIN Patiskum, Yobe state; On January 2, 2012, Boko Haram declared that Christian should leave Northern Nigeria within three days. Following the declaration more than 30 Christians were killed; on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2012, Pastor Ali Samur was killed in Maiduguri, Borno state; on November 18, 2012, a retired COCIN minister (Elisha Kabura) was killed in Maiduguri; 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2012, a Christian couple and their son were shot death on their way to the church in Kano; In Decemeber 1, 2012, Boko Haram attacked four churches in Borno; On December 28, 2012, fifteen Christians were killed in Musari, Borno state; on May 15, 2013 (CAN) secretary was murdered (Rev. Faye Pama Musa) in Maiduguri Borno state; In June 10, 2013, Rev. Jacob Kwizer of COCIN was killed in Gwoza, Borno state; In July 30, 2013 four bombs exploded and killed 45 Christians in Anglican church, Kano.

In September 25, 2013, Boko Haram killed a Pastor and his two children and set the house ablaze in Yobe state; In November 2, 2013, Boko Haram killed 30 wedding guests in a road in Borno state. (Uka journal vol.5 10-12). Other crimes against humanity include: Sexual slavery, prostitution, kidnapping of human beings (for example Chibok girls) are other forms of persecutions.

## **SOLUTIONS TO CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION**

1. Be aware of what is happening and take proactive measures.
2. Raise our voices and make persecution difficult to ignore, awakening slumbering consciences.

3. Provide material support to those persecuted in a variety of different ways, and
4. Pray for the “suffering and pray for a change of heart” (Canopy Gambrell Hall, 2022).

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The study examines the impact of persecution on the church in Northern Nigeria. The origin, the impact and the causes of persecution, the solutions to persecution and recommendations were critical examined in this research. The findings show that Christians in Northern Nigeria are persecuted through insidious and elevated forms of persecution with the aim of bringing a set back to the growth of Christianity for the expansion of Islam in the Northern region. The research resolved that lack of respect and honour to humanity results to all these vices. The findings encourage deliberate actions by the government to implement laws that will bring peaceful co-existence and tolerance through dialogue, constitutional rights and religious tolerance. The government should critically address areas that lead to destruction of human identity in the name of selfish gains whether through religious or political means, Man is created to serve God and humanity, not for destruction of lives and properties.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Churches and Christian organization/institutions should create awareness through seminars, workshops and crusades on current realities of Christian persecution to provide counter narratives to the existing secular narratives on political and economic competitions as the causes of these violent conflict.
2. CAN should voice out as Christian organization by kicking against Christian persecution, bearing in mind the church as a registered organization with freedom of operation.
3. Religious bodies like Christian association of Nigeria and the Catholic Bishop’s conference of Nigeria (CBCN) should from time to time confront the government on current security challenges and at the same time collaborate with INGOS to offer humanitarian assistance to victims that have not been assisted by the government.
4. The Federal Government should constitute an interreligious commission saddle with the responsibility of handling issues on religious conflict and persecution.
5. Federal Government should establish official internal displaced camps to accommodate victims of conflicts and persecution.
6. The Federal Government should adopt community led policing, where by indigenes and residents of communities are employed, trained and equipped to secure their environment.
7. Law makers should come out with legislation that will promote inclusivity free access to land, place of worship and equality in the country.
8. Christians should be wise by focusing their attention on God not going back to idol worship, God is always ready fight the battle when Christians remain faithful.

9. In countries that the government favors terrorism and lawlessness as the order of the day, Christians can defend themselves by trusting in God.
10. The church should be organizing press conferences to counter any move against Christian organizations and Christianity at large.

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