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## **Nigeria's death-for-blasphemy laws slammed at European Parliament**

- ***MEP Carlo Fidanza calls for overturn of Sharia-inspired blasphemy laws that violate fundamental rights of religious minorities***
- ***Fidanza brings attention to Nigerian musician's appeal to the Supreme Court of Nigeria, which challenges the constitutionality of the blasphemy laws under which he faces the death penalty***

ADF International(16.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3YGpcJO> – While a Sufi-musician waits to hear if he'll face the death penalty for his "blasphemy" in a high-profile case at the Nigerian Supreme Court, Italian MEP Carlo Fidanza has called attention to the persecution of religious minorities internationally through the criminalisation of "blasphemy" in countries such as Nigeria.

The politician highlighted the case of musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who was sentenced to death by hanging in August 2020 for posting song lyrics to WhatsApp that were deemed blasphemous.

With support from ADF International, Yahaya's case has been appealed to the Supreme Court of Nigeria, challenging the constitutionality of the Sharia-based blasphemy laws.

"We welcome the remarks of Carlo Fidanza and others calling attention to the egregious violations of fundamental rights that we are seeing in countries like Nigeria. For decades, human rights advocates have been waiting for an opportunity to overturn blasphemy laws in Nigeria and safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of speech that is protected by international law. Yahaya's case could be the catalyst for change we have been hoping for. We are supporting Yahaya's case because nobody should be persecuted for what they believe in, and as a result we hope that blasphemy laws will be eradicated in Nigeria once and for all." said Dr. Adina Portaru, Senior Counsel for ADF International in Brussels.

[Watch the speech at the Plenary of the European Parliament here \(Italian\).](#)

Fidanza, who serves as the Co-Chair of the European Parliament's Intergroup on Freedom of Religion and Belief and Religious Tolerance, noted that there are seven countries in the world where a person can be sentenced to death for blasphemy, including Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria.

The Member of the European Parliament called for blasphemy law in Nigeria to be overturned, calling them "contrary to the human rights of religious minorities, international law and Nigeria's commitments to its treaties."

Fidanza continued: "this would be an important signal internally, against the Islamist militias that are bloodying the country, and internationally, towards all states that use anti-blasphemy laws to target religious minorities."

For more on Yahaya's case, visit <https://adfinternational.org/nigeria-blasphemy-laws/>

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## **Against Nigeria's blasphemy laws**

***No one should be killed over their beliefs***

By Kelsey Zorzi

The Critic (03.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3XU1MoF> - In Nigeria, you can be put to death under the law for the "crime" of blasphemy. Sufi musician [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#), currently imprisoned for blasphemy, has petitioned the Nigerian Supreme Court to put an end to his criminal case, which centres on his sharing religious lyrics on the popular messaging platform WhatsApp. For exercising his fundamental rights to free expression and religious freedom, Yahaya's life is on the line. This potentially landmark case could abolish once and for all Northern Nigeria's Sharia blasphemy law — an urgently needed step for the peaceful coexistence of faiths in the country.

In March 2020 Yahaya shared song lyrics via WhatsApp that others viewed as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. His house was burned to the ground by a mob, and he was promptly arrested and charged with blasphemy under the Sharia Penal Code of Kano State. Without legal representation, he was tried, convicted and sentenced to death by hanging by a local Sharia judge.

Innocent of any crime, Yahaya now has appealed to the Supreme Court for justice. He filed his notice of appeal this month, following a decision by the lower courts to issue a retrial after an initial overturning of his conviction. If retried, Yahaya would more than likely be unjustly convicted again, landing him back on death row. It is thus imperative, and urgent, for the Supreme Court to hear his case and bring much needed legal clarity to end the abomination of blasphemy laws in Nigeria.

**In a split country, everyone stands to lose under these laws**

In accordance with Nigeria's own [constitution](#), the Supreme Court should rule decisively in favour of Yahaya's rights to free expression and religious freedom. International law — including international treaties to which Nigeria is a party — also demands that the Court uphold Yahaya's fundamental freedoms.

Blasphemy laws are [not unique to Nigeria](#). Approximately [40 per cent of countries in the world](#) have blasphemy laws in some form, and there are currently at least seven countries where a conviction for blasphemy can result in the death penalty. This is a crucial moment for Nigeria to step out as an international leader on the abolishment of blasphemy laws and serve as a model for other countries looking to end this grave human rights abuse.

Blasphemy laws have greatly exacerbated religious tensions in Nigeria. The criminalization of blasphemy perpetuates societal violence, giving fodder to existing tensions by sanctioning violence with a seal of legal approval. It breeds a climate of censorship, silencing individuals with the fear of breaking the law for sharing their faith. As exemplified by Yahaya's case, such laws punish the innocent who dare to express themselves.

Nobody should be punished, much less killed, for their religious ideas. Any person of faith or no faith at all can be sanctioned, and even killed, as a result of a blasphemy accusation. In a country of over 200 million, split nearly evenly between Christians and Muslims, everyone stands to lose under these laws. Their abolishment would dramatically improve the prospects for human rights in Nigeria.

### **Christian student Deborah Yakubu was stoned to death**

The reality of religiously motivated violence on the ground in Nigeria is grim. In the period between January 2021 and March 2022, over 6,000 Christians were targeted and killed. In May of this year, Christian student [Deborah Yakubu](#) was stoned to death and her body burned in Sokoto State, Nigeria, after classmates deemed her WhatsApp messages blasphemous. Following this tragedy, [Rhoda Ya'u Jatau](#), a Christian woman from the northeast, is now on trial for blasphemy for sharing a WhatsApp message condemning Deborah's brutal killing. Earlier this year, humanist [Mubarak Bala](#) was sentenced to 24 years in prison for social media posts critical of Islam.

The international religious freedom community has united in calling for urgent action to end the violence in Nigeria. In the United States, advocates repeatedly have [called](#) for the Biden administration to reinstate Nigeria as a "Country of Political Concern" on the State Department's list of the world's worst religious freedom violators.

The UK recently [joined](#) 17 other countries, as the chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, in "unequivocally" calling for the end of the use of the death penalty for allegations of blasphemy, apostasy or religious insult. Last week at a parliamentary [debate](#) on the persecution of Christians, MP Fiona Bruce, the UK Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief, gave an account of the "multiple atrocities happening in Nigeria". Earlier this year, she [raised](#) Yahaya Sharif-Aminu's case specifically in Parliament as an example of the application of the death penalty for blasphemy occurring in Commonwealth countries.

With a judgment expected in the spring of 2023, all eyes are on the Nigerian Supreme Court as we await justice for Yahaya and, ultimately, the abolishment of blasphemy laws in Northern Nigeria. Progress for Nigeria is contingent on fostering the robust freedom of expression and religion needed for a society to thrive. As Yahaya appeals not only for his own life, but for the rights of all Nigerians, let us stand with him and declare without

reserve: everyone has the right to express their opinions. In a free society, all should be able to express their beliefs without fear.

Photo: [www.ex-muslim.org.uk](http://www.ex-muslim.org.uk)

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## **Christian woman on trial for blasphemy in Northeast Nigeria**

### ***Charges based on a WhatsApp message she shared.***

Morning Star News (05.10.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3TUVQbU> - A Christian woman in northeast Nigeria is on trial after being held incommunicado for more than four months on blasphemy charges for forwarding a WhatsApp message, sources said.

Rhoda Ya'ú Jatau, 45, was arrested in Bauchi state in May after receiving a WhatsApp message from Ghana condemning the [gruesome killing](#) of Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, a university student in Sokoto state also falsely accused of blaspheming Islam.

Jatau shared the message condemning Yakubu's May 12 death with colleagues in Warji County, and Muslims who saw it [accused her of blasphemy](#) and sought to kill her. Security agents from the Department of State Services, Nigeria's secret police, arrested her on May 20, and she was incarcerated when Muslim mobs stormed her house seeking to kill her, sources said.

"Ever since her arrest, Mrs. Jatau has been detained in prison over false accusations of blasphemy," charged with "inciting public disturbance, exciting contempt of religious creed and cyber-stalking," said her attorney, Joshua Nasara, in a press statement.

Efforts to secure bail for Jatau, a health worker with the Warji Local Government Area, have been "frustrated and denied by government authorities and leaders of Islamic groups in the state," Nasara said.

The charges accuse Jatau, of Tudun Alheri, of posting a video that disparages Allah, Muhammad (the prophet of Islam), his parents and the entire Muslim community to a WhatsApp group of the Primary Healthcare Authority of Warji Local Government Area, allegedly "with the intent to cause religious crisis," he said.

The charges allege that she thus violated Sections 114, 210 of the Penal Code Law and Section 24 subsection 1b(i) of Cybercrime Prohibition Prevention Act 2015.

Jatau was held for two weeks before she was charged, and since then she has been held incommunicado in prison as authorities and Muslim leaders in the state delayed her trial, Nasara said.

An application for bail was filed on July 20, after she was held the legal maximum of two months without trial, but it was not assigned to a judge until July 26, and by then judges had gone on vacation, Nasara said.

"It was in August that the application was reassigned to a vacation judge who heard it for the first time on Aug. 11," he said.

The Rev. Ishaku Dano of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Warji County said the blasphemy charges are false. Jatau shared the WhatsApp message only as a word of caution against further violence in northern Nigeria, where Muslim mobs were wreaking havoc, he said.

"Information we obtained from Mrs. Jatau shows that the WhatsApp message she received and shared in her group was for caution against violence and against the use of derogatory language in addressing other people's faith, but that was not the interpretation by the Muslims," Pastor Dano said. "And since the occurrence of the incident in May 2022, there have been campaigns by Muslims for Mrs. Jatau to be killed for blasphemy against Muhammad."

### **Pastor Attacked**

In the Birshi area of the city of Bauchi, gunmen on Sept. 16 broke into the home of Pastor Zakka Luka Magaji and shot a relative staying with him, sources said.

"Seven terrorists invaded my house and attacked me and my family," Pastor Magaji said. "I was their target even though I don't know their motives. The injured relation staying with me who was shot during the attack is getting better now."

The chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Bauchi State Chapter, said the attack on Pastor Magaji typifies the challenges facing Christians in northern Nigeria.

"The government must do everything possible to protect Nigerians from such attacks by terrorists, as life is sacred and must be protected at all costs," said the Rev. Abraham Damina Dimeus.

Ahmed Wakil, spokesman for the Bauchi State Police Command, confirmed that seven armed terrorists attacked the pastor's home, that he was unhurt and that the relative was wounded.

"A 32-year-old man who is a member of Christian Life Church living with Pastor Zakka was injured in the process," Wakil said. "The police personnel who were there on a rescue mission immediately took the injured victim and rushed him to Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital (ATBUTH), Bauchi, for treatment of gunshot wounds."

Nigeria led the world in Christians killed for their faith last year (Oct. 1, 2020 to Sept. 30, 2021) at 4,650, up from 3,530 the previous year, according to Open Doors' 2022 World Watch List report. The number of kidnapped Christians was also highest in Nigeria, at more than 2,500, up from 990 the previous year, according to the WWL report.

Nigeria trailed only China in the number of churches attacked, with 470 cases, according to the report.

In the 2022 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian, Nigeria jumped to seventh place, its highest ranking ever, from No. 9 the previous year.

*Photo: Rhoda Ya'u Jatau. (Facebook) - morningstarnews.org*

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## USCIRF releases new report on violence impacting religious freedom

USCIRF (06.09/2022) - <https://bit.ly/3QI9Ycj> - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) has released the following new report:

[Violence and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#) – This policy update identifies the ways in which widespread violence by nonstate actors in Nigeria threaten freedom of religion or belief. Examples detailed in the report include militant Islamist group violence, some forms of identity-based violence, mob violence, and violence impacting worship. It also explores the role that poor governance plays in driving much of this violence, as well as the impact on religious freedom of several aggravating factors exacerbating insecurity, including localized religious discrimination, the politicization of religion, and wider demographic and economic trends. The report concludes by highlighting the U.S. government’s responsibility to respond to religious freedom violations and rising atrocity risk in Nigeria, as mandated by U.S. law, and laying out policy response options.

In its [2022 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that the U.S. State Department designate [Nigeria](#) as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. In June 2022, a USCIRF [delegation](#) visited Nigeria and published a [USCIRF Spotlight Podcast](#) episode detailing the visit’s findings and takeaways.

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## Court sentences Mubarak Bala to 24 years imprisonment for blasphemy

By Dennis Erezi

The Guardian (05.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3r8ihi9> - Kano State high court has sentenced a Nigerian atheist Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison after being convicted of blasphemy against Islam.

[Bala was arrested in 2020](#) in Kaduna state, and transferred to Kano, his home state. He has been in detention since then.

On April 27 2020, Bala compared popular Lagos pastor and president of Synagogue Church of Nations Prophet TB Joshua to Prophet Mohammed.

"There's no difference between prophet TB Joshua (S.A.W) of Lagos and Muhammadu (A.S.) of Saudi Arabia, it is better for our Nigeria to be terrorism," Bala said wrote on his Facebook page.

In another post, Bala said, "Whoever believes religion has been duped – If you cant take blasphemy against Islam, criticism of its doctrines, this page is not for you. I have not even started ooo."

"Religion insults human reason and conscience, duped me that I have another lifetime," Mubarak said in his Facebook bio.

His posts were greeted with threats of arrest for blasphemy in the comment section. Unbothered about his stance against Islam, Bala said the threat was from 'morons' who should know better.

Days later, a group of lawyers petitioned the Kano State Police command to prosecute Bala for insulting Prophet Muhammad.

Bala renounced his Islamic faith in 2014.

The 37-year-old president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria pleaded guilty to all 18 charges and asked for leniency.

While pleading with the court on Tuesday to tender justice with mercy, Bala promised not to repeat the said blasphemous post, saying he did not know it would elicit the sort of reactions it got when he shared them.

The judge, Justice Farouk Lawan, and the convict's lawyer, James Ibori, had tried to convince him against his guilty plea but the convict insisted he knew what he was doing and maintained his plea.

Bala's lawyer told the court that his client had a mental problem, for which he was treated at Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, Kano.

*Photo: Nigerian atheist, Mubarak Bala*

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## **Catholic priest abducted, parish worker killed in Kaduna**

**By Odiwuor Opiyo**

CISA (11.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3I6N6cL> - A catholic priest in Nigeria, Rev Fr Joseph Akete Beko, was kidnapped in the wee hours of Tuesday morning according to an official statement by the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna.

"We regret to officially confirm the incident of abduction of one of our priests, Rev Fr Joseph Akete Beko from his residence at St John Catholic Church, Kudenda, at about 1:30 am on Tuesday, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022," read the statement.

The statement also said the security guard, a Mr Luka Phillip, was killed and four other people alongside the priest were abducted from the neighbouring houses.

“We call on all men and women of goodwill to continue to pray for the safe release of Fr Joseph Akete Bako and the other innocent persons abducted with him; for the peaceful repose of Mr Luka Philip and divine consolation upon his bereaved family,” implored Rev Fr Christian Okewu Emmanuel, the Chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna.

Rev Fr Beko is yet another victim of the increasing wave of terror unleashed on Christians in Nigeria by perceived Islamic extremist groups since 2009 when the Boko Haram insurgency began.

Ethnic conflicts between the predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers in the country over grazing land has further complicated the question of religious tolerance.

On February 6, 2022, another priest, Rev. Fr. Joseph Danjuma Shekari was also abducted by unknown gunmen from the Rectory at St. Monica’s Catholic Church, Ikulu Pari in Kauru Local Government Area, Kaduna State. He was, however, returned safely after a day, according to a report by Fr. Emmanuel Uchekukwu the then chancellor of Nigeria’s Kafanchan Diocese.

“With hearts filled with joy, we raise our voices in a symphony of praises as we announce the return of our brother, Rev. Fr. Joseph Danjuma Shekari, who was abducted by armed persons,” he said at the time.

In the incident, the Parish cook was killed.

In 2021, Fr. Izu Marcel Onyeocha, a member of the Congregation of Missionaries, Sons of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Claretians) was kidnapped and later freed.

“May God bring to an end this evil of abduction and terrorism in our land,” prayed Rev Fr Okewu.

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## **Blasphemy: USCIRF Commissioner Davie calls for the immediate release of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu**

USCIRF (04.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Cirets> – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) called for the release of Muslim gospel singer and member of the Tijaniyya Sufi Islamic order **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu** on the second anniversary of his arrest.

*“USCIRF urges Nigerian authorities to immediately release Yahaya Sharif-Aminu and guarantee his safety,” said **Commissioner Frederick A. Davie** who advocates for Sharif-Aminu as part of **USCIRF’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project**. “Convicting this man on blasphemy charges for expressing his beliefs is reprehensible—and sentencing him to death for such actions is absurd. He does not deserve to be detained for two years, let alone sentenced to death. And allowing a mob to burn down his family home with impunity only adds further insult to this grievous injury.”*

On March 4, 2020, a mob **burned down** Sharif-Aminu’s family home after he was accused of performing and sharing a song considered blasphemous in WhatsApp. Later that same month, Nigerian authorities arrested him on blasphemy charges. On August 10, 2020, a Kano court sentenced Sharif-Aminu to death for blasphemy, in violation of Section 382 (B) of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law. On January 21, 2021, the High Court of Kano State’s appellate division overturned his death sentence, citing

irregularities, and ordered a retrial. Last month, the Court of Appeals in Kano postponed the retrial until May 12, 2022, agreeing to the Kano State government's request for more time to file its response.

*"Sharif-Aminu's treatment violates international human rights standards and the Nigerian Constitution, but Nigerian authorities still have an opportunity to turn this situation around,"* added Commissioner Davie. *"The United States government should pressure Nigerian authorities to ensure Yahaya's release and safety and that of his family. The U.S. government also should work with Nigerian authorities to repeal blasphemy laws still present in state-sponsored courts."*

In recent years, Kano state authorities have perpetrated some of Nigeria's most egregious religious freedom violations. They have arrested, charged, and/or convicted several individuals for blasphemy, prohibited broadcast stations from airing religious content, restricted religious poets and performers, and arrested and detained individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community based on their official interpretation and enforcement of Sharia.

In its **2021 Annual Report**, USCIRF recommended that the State Department redesignate **Nigeria** as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. USCIRF was **appalled** when the State Department removed Nigeria from its designation as a CPC in November 2021 after designating Nigeria for the first time in December 2020. Additionally, USCIRF published a recent factsheet on **religious freedom conditions in Nigeria's Kano State** and an episode of the **USCIRF Spotlight podcast** on why redesignating Nigeria as a CPC is warranted.

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*The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a commissioner, please contact USCIRF at [media@uscirf.gov](mailto:media@uscirf.gov).*

Photo : [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#)

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