

May 18, 2023

Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria
Office of the Presidency
Aso Rock Presidential Villa
Three Arms Zone 900103
Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria
info@statehouse.gov.ng
CC: Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation

Letter Calling for Immediate Release of Nigerian Prisoner of Conscience Yahaya Sharif-Aminu

Dear President Buhari:

We are a group of Nigerian and international organizations and advocates focused on promoting the protection of human rights, including within Nigeria. We are writing to express our grave concern at the continuing prosecution of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu in Nigeria for allegations of blasphemy. We strongly urge Nigeria to immediately release Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, withdraw all charges against him, and ensure his safety.

In March 2020, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a Sufi musician in Kano State, was arrested on charges of blasphemy for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad in two WhatsApp audio messages and held without bail. Around the time of his arrest, a mob burned down his home, and no member of the mob has been prosecuted. During his trial, he was not afforded a lawyer. He was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging in August 2020 for violating Section 382(b) of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law.

While a court later overturned the conviction, he was ordered to a retrial, where he would face the same potential death penalty. Sharif-Aminu is now appealing to the Supreme Court of Nigeria to find Section 382(b) unconstitutional and in violation of international law, including the African Charter. He has now spent over three years in prison for his peaceful and brief remarks that merely expressed his religious beliefs.

Kano State's blasphemy law violates both the Nigerian Constitution and international law. The Nigerian Constitution protects the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, and expression, and that includes the ability to peacefully share with others the tenets of one's beliefs, even if others may strongly disagree with them.

International law, including the African Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, similarly protect freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. It also requires that the death penalty be reserved only for the most serious crimes in those States that have not abolished the death penalty. In no sense can the mere posting of peaceful audio messages expressing one's beliefs amount to a severe crime warranting death, or even any crime at all.

International observers have condemned the continuing prosecution of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu and called for his release. On April 20 of this year, the European Parliament overwhelmingly called on Nigeria to immediately release Sharif-Aminu and found that Nigeria's blasphemy laws "are in violation of its international human rights commitments, the African Charter and the Nigerian Constitution." Officials from the United Nations have similarly raised concerns over his prosecution and called for his release, as have officials from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Nigeria is also one of only seven countries in the world—including Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia—with criminal blasphemy laws for which a person can be sentenced to death.

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu should never have been arrested and imprisoned in the first instance. Instead, he has had to suffer mob violence and spend years in prison for simply and peacefully sharing his beliefs with others.

A democracy cannot function when the most basic freedoms are not protected, and as the largest democracy in Africa, Nigeria's example matters. But now, Nigeria and Your Excellency have an opportunity to set a strong example that you will work to protect the rights of your citizens, not disregard them.

For all of these reasons, we reiterate our call that Nigeria immediately release Yahaya Sharif-Aminu.

Sincerely,

Organizations

21Wilberforce
Accountability Lab Nigeria
ADF International
Alliance of Inclusive Muslims
Anglican Persecuted Church Network
Avocats Sans Frontières France (Lawyers Without Borders France)
Boat People SOS
Buddhist Solidarity Association
Center for Pluralism
CHAT-PRAY-ACT
Christian Solidarity International
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Committee for Relevant Art (CORA)
Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam
Coptic Solidarity
Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience
Culture Advocates Caucus
Elixir Trust Foundation
Ex-Muslims of North America
Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA)
GAFCON Suffering Church Network
Genocide Watch
Global Christian Relief
Global Peace Foundation Nigeria
Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE)
Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam
International Christian Concern
International Committee on Nigeria
International Institute for Religious Freedom
International Senior Lawyers Project
Jubilee Campaign
Katartismos Global
Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice
Lead Africa International e.V (Germany)
Lumières Sans Frontières
Media Foundation for West Africa

Muslims for Progressive Values
Nigerian Centre of PEN International (PEN Nigeria)
NOPRIN Foundation (Network on Police Reform in Nigeria)
Religious Freedom Institute
Save the Persecuted Christians
Set My People Free
Shai Fund
Unchained Vibes Africa
Vietnamese Women for Human Rights

Individuals

Eedris Abdulkareem
Nigerian Rapper, Singer, Activist and Olympics Torchbearer

Jackie Abramian
Founder
Global Cadence

Segun Adefila
Nigerian Actor and Culture Activist
Artistic Director, Crown Troupe of Africa

Folu Agoi
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Nigerian Centre of PEN International (PEN Nigeria)

Toyin Akinosho
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Member of the House of Lords (UK)

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Nigerian Actor, Producer and Event Anchor

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Former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*

Sarah Virginia Brinton, Baroness Brinton
Member of the House of Lords (UK)

Raymond Bola Browne (a.k.a. DJ Raybee)
Nigerian DJ, On-Air Personality and Culture Activist

Sir Peter Bottomley
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Global Peace Foundation Nigeria

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Shai Fund

Lauren B. Homer
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Law and Liberty Trust

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Member of the House of Lords (UK)

Dr. Shuaibu Hussein
Nigerian Journalist and Film Curator

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Former Prisoner of Conscience in Sudan
Co-Founder & Director of Global Mobilization
Tahrir Alnisa Foundation

Emmanuel Ikule
National Coordinator
NOPRIN Foundation (Network on Police Reform in Nigeria)

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Nigerian Rapper and Poet

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Centre for Human Resources and Trauma Care
Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri, Nigeria

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CHAT-PRAY-ACT and Bo Sita MADE Initiative

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Nigerian Voiceover Artist
Former President, Association of Voiceover Artists of Nigeria

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Nigerian Actor, Producer and Director

Samuel Osaze
Programme Manager
Unchained Vibes Africa

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President
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Member of the House of Lords (UK)

Joël Voordewind
Member of Parliament of the Netherlands (2006-2021)

Frank Wolf
Member of U.S. Congress 1981-2015, retired

Norbert Young
Nigerian Actor and Educator

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