



Reports

Craig Bailie

Has the African Union done enough to advance FoRB and curb religious persecution?

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

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We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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This 2021 factsheet¹ published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom documents instances of religious freedom violations, including of a violent nature, against Muslims in Africa.

In June this year, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) attacked pupils of the Lhubiriha secondary school in Mpondwe, Uganda, leaving 37 dead – 20 were attacked by machetes. The rest burned to death. Pupils at the secondary school were singing Gospel songs² at the time of the attack. After the assailants were done, they chanted “Allahu Akbar”, meaning “God is greatest”.

Finally, consider the BBC illustrated documentary entitled, “Branded and beaten,”³ that highlights the experience of Nigerian children accused of murder and witchcraft.

These are only three accounts of ongoing violence in Africa based on religion or belief.

International Day commemorating victims of religious violence

On 28 May 2019, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/73/296⁴, designating the 22nd of August as “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief”. This resolution reinforces and draws on Article 18⁵ of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which reads as follows:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

What is FoRB and why does it matter?

Article 18 is the legal institution that seeks to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief (also known as FoRB) globally. More than this, Article 18

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Violations against Muslims in Africa Factsheet*, <https://uscirf.gov/publication/violations-against-muslims-africa-factsheet>.

² Ashley Lime, Anne Okumu, *Uganda school attack: ‘Gospel songs interrupted by screaming’*, <https://bbc.com/news/world-africa-65945814>.

³ Marc Ellison, *Branded and beaten: The children accused of witchcraft and murder*, https://bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/nigeria_children_witchcraft.

⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UN-DOC/GEN/N19/155/77/PDF/N1915577.pdf?OpenElementt>.

⁵ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

defines FoRB – a universal human right also protected in several other⁶ international human rights treaties.

FoRB matters for at least four related reasons: human beings matter, freedom matters, religion matters, and diversity matters.

FoRB matters because every human being matters. Some religions – Judaism and Christianity, for example, believe that every person is created in God’s image⁷. For this reason, every person possesses inherent value and dignity, irrespective of his or her beliefs.

Groups that believe in and recognise inherent human value, whatever their reasons may be, will agree with the need to respect the freedoms without which the individual cannot fully exercise his or her agency and properly pursue his or her potential.

The more governments respect these freedoms, including FoRB, the more they help cultivate a space in which every person has the opportunity to give his or her best to society. Therefore, individual freedom, if properly harnessed, benefits the freedom of the collective.

Religion matters, because, as noted above, it can reinforce the case for inherent human value and the necessary freedoms that follow from this. Without denying the harm that can, has, and continues to be done in the name of God or religion, religion can also be a source of peace, security and stability.

The freedom to practice one’s religion has been shown to have positive outcomes. Among these, according to the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion (IPPFoRB)⁸, are contributions towards “good governance, development, rule of law, peace and stability.”

For further insights on the positive impact of religion, specifically, as it relates to peace and security, readers should consider the freely available “Religion and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa,” by Lado Ludovic, “Religious Contributions to Peacemaking,” by the United States Institute of Peace, and, the proceedings of a 2020 conference on “Religion and Peace Building in Africa”.⁹ For those seeking to better understand FoRB, I recommend the book

⁶ International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), *What is freedom of religion or belief?*, [https://ippforb.com/toolkit/what-is-forb#:~:text=The%20right%20to%20freedom%20of,UDHR\)%20and%20other%20international%20human](https://ippforb.com/toolkit/what-is-forb#:~:text=The%20right%20to%20freedom%20of,UDHR)%20and%20other%20international%20human).

⁷ Kenneth Samples, *Human Beings: God or Creatures Made in God’s Image?*, <https://reasons.org/explore/publications/nrtb-e-zine/human-beings-god-or-creatures-made-in-gods-image>.

⁸ International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), *What is freedom of religion or belief?*, <https://ippforb.com/toolkit/what-is-forb>.

⁹ S. J. Lado Tonlieu Ludovic, *Religion and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa*, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7_4; David R. Smock (ed.), *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/01/religious-contributions-peacemaking-when-religion-brings-peace-not-war>; Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, Ejikemeuwa J. O. Ndubisi, *Religion and Peace Building in Africa*, <https://acjol.org/index.php/jassd/issue/view/56>.

by Bielefeldt and Wiener: *Religious Freedom Under Scrutiny*.¹⁰

Finally, FoRB matters because it promotes and protects diversity. Diversity has benefits for organisations as well as nations, as I have recently argued in my article on political sloganeering in South Africa.¹¹

Religious persecution is increasing worldwide

Despite the benefits that accompany FoRB, the primary reason why the UN passed resolution A/RES/73/296 is the continuing and increasing acts of violence¹² being committed globally in the name of religion and/or against persons because of their religion or belief.

Alongside the UN's observation that religious violence is increasing, several sources have reported a corollary development: an increase in religious persecution. While these two phenomena are certainly related, they are not the same.

Religious persecution is broader in its scope than religious violence. While all persons who suffer violence because of their religious identity are victims of religious persecution, religious persecution need not take violent forms. Furthermore, both governments and private or non-state actors can be guilty of religious persecution.

Among the sources that have reported an increase in religious persecution over recent years are the Pew Research Center (PRC),¹³ Aid to the Church in Need,¹⁴ Voice of the Martyrs¹⁵ and Open Doors¹⁶. All except the PRC focus specifically on the experience of persecuted Christians.

¹⁰ Heiner Bielefeldt, Michael Wiener, *Religious Freedom Under Scrutiny*, Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, <https://jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16t67hm>.

¹¹ Craig Bailie, *Every South African should be concerned about the EFF's singing of 'Kill the boer, kill the farmer'*, <https://dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-08-10-eff-singing-kill-the-boer-every-s-african-should-be-concerned/>.

¹² United Nations, *Human Rights Related to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, <https://un.org/en/observances/religious-based-violence-victims-day>.

¹³ Pew Research Center, *In 2018, Government Restrictions on Religion Reach Highest Level Globally in More Than a Decade*, <https://pewresearch.org/religion/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/>.

¹⁴ Aid to the Church in Need, *Christian Persecution Religious Freedom*, <https://church-inneed.org/christian-persecution-religious-freedom/>.

¹⁵ The Voice of the Martyrs, <https://persecution.com/>.

¹⁶ OpenDoors, <https://opendoors.org/en-US/>.

The victims of religious persecution

Religious persecution is not the experience of Christians alone, however. The PRC reported in 2020,¹⁷ for example, that “Christians and Muslims experienced harassment in more countries than any other religious groups in 2018”. Here, harassment is defined as including “a wide range of actions – from verbal abuse to physical violence and killings – motivated at least in part by the target’s religious identity.”

Doug Bandow (senior fellow at the Cato Institute)¹⁸ and Dr. Elewina Ochab (a lawyer with the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute and co-founder of the Coalition for Genocide Response)¹⁹, respectively, have cited the religious persecution of at least 10 different religious groups across the same number of countries.

Which religious group is most persecuted²⁰ in the world remains a contested affair²¹. In the spirit of Ubuntu,²² UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion, Ahmed Shaheed, has said, “Risk to the human rights of one community is a risk to all society.”²³

Therefore, what matters more than which religious group is most persecuted, is that everyone’s right to FoRB is upheld and respected, irrespective of any person or group’s religious affiliation or non-affiliation, or the size of the religious or non-religious group with which any person identifies.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Harassment of religious groups continues to be reported in more than 90% of countries*, <https://pewresearch.org/religion/2020/11/10/harassment-of-religious-groups-continues-to-be-reported-in-more-than-90-of-countries/>.

¹⁸ Doug Bandow, *Religious Persecution Around the Globe: A Guide*, <https://cato.org/commentary/religious-persecution-around-globe-guide>.

¹⁹ Ewelina U. Ochab, *Bracing For More Acts Of Violence Based On Religion Or Belief*, <https://forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2021/08/21/bracing-for-more-acts-of-violence-based-on-religion-or-belief/?sh=570202e344af>.

²⁰ Doug Bandow, *Christianity Is the World’s Most Persecuted Religion, Confirms New Report*, <https://cato.org/commentary/christianity-worlds-most-persecuted-religion-confirms-new-report>.

²¹ Rich Barlow, *Are Christians the Most Persecuted Religious Group?*, <https://bu.edu/articles/2014/are-christians-the-most-persecuted-religious-group/>.

²² Dennis Kilama, *Christians In Community: Redeeming The Concept Of Ubuntu*, <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/redeeming-ubuntu/>.

²³ United Nations, *UN expert raises alarm over serious human rights violations against religious minorities in situations of conflict*, [https://ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/un-expert-raises-alarm-over-serious-human-rights-violations-against - :~:text=](https://ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/un-expert-raises-alarm-over-serious-human-rights-violations-against-#:~:text=).

The legal-institutional framework supporting FoRB in Africa

The promotion of and legal protection extended to FoRB in Article 18 of the UDHR is echoed in Article 8²⁴ of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) of 1981:

Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms.

The OAU (Organisation of African Unity) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism,²⁵ adopted in 1999, is also relevant. Much of the religious persecution that happens in Africa, because of its underlying motive and nature, fits the definition of terrorism in Article 1(3)(a)(1) of the Convention:

“Terrorist Act” means: (a) any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a State Party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to, any person, any number of group of persons or causes or may cause damage to public or private property, natural resources, environmental or cultural heritage and is calculated or intended to: (i) intimidate, put in fear, force, coerce, or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint, or to act according to certain principle.

Signatories to the Convention committed to undertaking several actions against terrorism, and by implication, those instances of religious persecution that meet with the definition of a terrorist act.

Furthermore, the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063²⁶ – defined²⁷ by the continental organisation as “Africa's blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future” and “the continent's strategic framework that aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development” – makes four noteworthy references to religion.

All-in-all, Agenda 2063, and by implication, the AU, recognises that religious diversity in Africa is a source of strength, that Africa's religions are cultural assets, that the politicization of religion and religious extremism must be opposed, and finally, that “no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded” because of his or her identity, including religious identity.

²⁴ African Union, *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_-_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdf.

²⁵ African Union, *OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism*, <https://au.int/en/treaties/oau-convention-prevention-and-combating-terrorism>.

²⁶ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (Popular version)*, https://au.int/Agenda2063/popular_version.

²⁷ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>.

Religion in Africa

These proclamations are especially significant given the historical and contemporary status of religion in Africa. Kenyan-born Christian philosopher and author, John Mbiti, wrote in 1970 that African people are “notoriously religious”.²⁸

More recently, a book authored by Professor Bernard Boyo of Daystar University in Nairobi, “brings to the surface the continued importance that religion holds in African life, not only in terms of numbers of believers, but also regarding the varieties of religious experiences and its links with politics.”²⁹

Scholars Lado Ludovic³⁰ and Ikechukwu Kanu and Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi,³¹ respectively, describe Africa as a “profoundly religious continent” and refer to religion as something that “permeates the way of life of an African”.

Of the 10 countries in the world with the largest Muslim and Christian populations respectively, 3 of each are in Africa, according to the PRC³². Africa is not only home to the highest number³³ of Christians in the world but Africa’s Christians are also believed to be the most committed³⁴.

Religious persecution in Africa

Unfortunately, the reality of religious persecution in Africa questions the guarantees communicated in Article 1(3)(a)(1) of the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and the ACHPR, as well as the laudable aspirations³⁵ that the AU communicated more recently in Agenda 2063.

²⁸ Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, *Religious Traditions in Africa: An Overview of Origins, Basic Beliefs, and Practices*, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137498052_2#:~:text=The%20three%20main%20religious%20traditions,a%20long%20history%20and%20influence.

²⁹ Bernard Boyo, *The Church and Politics: A Theological Reflection*, Hippo Books; Langham, 2021.

³⁰ S. J. Lado Tonlieu Ludovic, *Religion and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa*, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7_4.

³¹ Ikechukwu Kanu and Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi, *Religion and Peace Building in Africa*, <https://acjol.org/index.php/jassd/issue/view/56.>

³² Jeff Diamant, The countries with the 10 largest Christian populations and the 10 largest Muslim populations, [https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/.](https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/)

³³ Gina A. Zurlo, *Who Owns Global Christianity?*, [https://gordonconwell.edu/blog/who-owns-global-christianity/.](https://gordonconwell.edu/blog/who-owns-global-christianity/)

³⁴ Joey Marshall, *The world’s most committed Christians live in Africa, Latin America – and the U.S.*, [https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/22/the-worlds-most-committed-christians-live-in-africa-latin-america-and-the-u-s/.](https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/22/the-worlds-most-committed-christians-live-in-africa-latin-america-and-the-u-s/)

³⁵ African Union, *Our Aspirations for the Africa We Want*, <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/aspirations.>

According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2022,³⁶ sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has emerged as the “global epicentre of terrorism” while the Africa Center for Strategic Studies reported “a new record of extremist violence in Africa in 2021.”³⁷

An Institute for Security Studies (ISS) report published in early 2022, revealed that “Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 48% of global deaths from terrorism. The report continues: “Attacks have spread beyond historical hotspots such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to southern Africa and coastal regions of West Africa.”³⁸

The above-mentioned research outputs on terrorism and violent extremism are relevant to religious persecution, firstly, because religion is a significant driver and/or enabler of these activities in Africa, and secondly, because these activities often target persons because of their religious identity or affiliation. Therefore, discussions about terrorism or violent extremism in Africa should ideally include discussions about religious persecution.

Despite religion being a significant driver of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa, the ISS report fails to cite ‘religion’ or ‘persecution’ in its publication. The GTI only refers to “religion” twice in its 99-page report, and “persecution” not at all.

According to Open Doors’ 2023 World Watch List (WWL)³⁹ – a ranking of the 50 countries⁴⁰ in the world where Christians face the most extreme persecution – violence affecting Christians in SSA specifically has reached new heights.⁴¹

Voice of the Martyrs corroborates⁴² this finding while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes⁴³ that the shift in violent extremism (a corollary of religious persecution) from the Middle East⁴⁴ to SSA has received relatively little attention from the international community. Journalist Hardeep

³⁶ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2022*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2022>.

³⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Surge in Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel Dominates Africa’s Fight against Extremists*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2022-01-surge-militant-islamist-violence-sahel-dominates-africa-fight-extremists/>.

³⁸ Institute for Security Studies (ISS), *Terrorism and violent extremism expand despite AU efforts*, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/terrorism-and-violent-extremism-expand-despite-au-efforts>.

³⁹ OpenDoors, *World Watch List 2023*, <https://opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>.

⁴⁰ OpenDoors South Africa, *World Watch List 2023 Premiere*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=RTvR-D7qBuY>.

⁴¹ OpenDoors, *Alarming growth in the worldwide persecution of Christians*, <https://opendoors.org.za/media-release-alarming-growth-in-the-worldwide-persecution-of-christians/>

⁴² Voice of the Martyrs USA, *Africa: Increasing Christian Persecution Part I*, https://youtube.com/watch?v=BDUI_1eQlg.

⁴³ AfricaNews, *Lack of jobs responsible more for violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa*, <https://africanews.com/2023/02/08/lack-of-jobs-responsible-more-for-violent-extremism-in-sub-saharan-africa-undp/>.

⁴⁴ BBC News, *Christian persecution ‘at near genocide levels’*, <https://bbc.com/news/uk-48146305>.

Singh, writing for *The Spectator*, asks about the persecution of Nigerian Christians, “When will the world wake up?”⁴⁵

The lack of attention given to religious persecution is partly what makes the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief so significant.

Of the 50 countries included in Open Doors’ 2023 WWL,⁴⁶ 19 are in Africa and 14 in SSA more specifically. Five African countries feature in the 2023 WWL top 10⁴⁷: Somalia (2nd),⁴⁸ Eritrea (4th),⁴⁹ Libya (5th),⁵⁰ Nigeria (6th),⁵¹ and Sudan (10th)⁵².

Each of these states is identified as being characterised by “extreme persecution” of Christians. This means they score between 81 and 100 points. Furthermore, violence is a feature of the persecution of Christians in each of these countries.

Why Nigeria is of special concern

Even though its positioned lower on the 2023 WWL than three other African countries, Nigeria’s ranking is of special concern.

International Christian Concern has described Nigeria as the “World’s Scariest Country to be a Christian”⁵³. Of the 5 African countries ranked in the 2023 WWL top 10, Nigeria is ranked the highest for violence, receiving the maximum score. In addition to being the African country with the largest Christian population (about half the country’s people identify as Christian),⁵⁴ Nigeria has climbed 8 rankings on the WWL since 2018.

⁴⁵ The Spectator, Hardeep Singh, *When will the world wake up to the persecution of Nigerian Christians?*, <https://spectator.co.uk/article/when-will-the-world-wake-up-to-the-persecution-of-nigerian-christians/>.

⁴⁶ OpenDoors, *World Watch List 2023: The Top 50 countries where Christians experience the most persecution*, <https://opendoors.org.za/christian-persecution/world-watch-list-2023/>.

⁴⁷ OpenDoors UK & Ireland, *Open Doors World Watch List 2023: Top 10 countries*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=4t3Wc9IWwQ4>.

⁴⁸ OpenDoors, *Somalia*, <https://opendoors.org.za/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/somalia/>

⁴⁹ CBN News, *PRAY: Hundreds of Christians Held in Prison in Eritrea for Their Faith*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=6S1Jy2H1e78>.

⁵⁰ The Guardian, *Six Libyans face death penalty for converting to Christianity*, <https://theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/03/six-libyans-face-death-penalty-for-converting-to-christianity>.

⁵¹ Christianity Today, Diana Chandler, *Hundreds of Nigerian Christians Killed in Recent Attacks*, <https://christianitytoday.com/news/2023/june/nigeria-christians-killed-persecution-churches-destroyed.html>.

⁵² The Gospel Coalition, *Christians on the Run in Sudan*, <https://thegospelcoalition.org/article/christians-sudan/>.

⁵³ International Christian Concern, *Nigeria is World’s Scariest Country to be a Christian*, <https://persecution.org/2022/05/14/nigeria-worlds-scariest-country-christian/>.

⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, Jeff Diamant, *The countries with the 10 largest Christian populations and the 10 largest Muslim populations*, <https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/01/>

Citing Open Doors, Singh reports, “More Christians are killed in Nigeria for their faith than anywhere else in the world. Of the 5,621 people murdered worldwide in 2022 for their belief in Christ, almost nine in ten died in Nigeria.”⁵⁵

Furthermore, Nigeria remains Africa’s biggest economy⁵⁶ and most populous nation⁵⁷ at the time of writing. Significant developments in Nigeria, therefore, have had and will continue to have consequences for the wider region, including because of the porous borders that remain a general feature of African states.

The rate and nature of religious persecution in Nigeria, next to the size of the country’s economy, suggests that successive governments have failed to take advantage of the country’s GDP to improve the lives and circumstances of ordinary Nigerians, 40 % of whom live below the national poverty line.⁵⁸ This is a source of recruitment for violent extremism according to the UNDP⁵⁹ and others.⁶⁰

The religious persecution and violent extremism affecting Christians,⁶¹ Muslims, atheists (watch the award-winning BBC documentary, “The cost of being an atheist”)⁶² and members of other⁶³ religions and beliefs in Nigeria is why

the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/.

⁵⁵ The Spectator, Hardeep Singh, When will the world wake up to the persecution of Nigerian Christians?, <https://spectator.co.uk/article/when-will-the-world-wake-up-to-the-persecution-of-nigerian-christians/#:~:text=More%20Christians%20are%20killed%20in,to%20the%20charity%20Open%20Doors>.

⁵⁶ Aljazeera, *Africa’s largest economy, Nigeria, tops growth forecasts*, <https://aljazeera.com/economy/2022/2/17/africas-largest-economy-nigeria-tops-growth-forecasts>.

⁵⁷ Statista, *African countries with the largest population as of 2020*, <https://statista.com/statistics/1121246/population-in-africa-by-country/#:~:text=Nigeria%20has%20the%20largest%20population,Africa%20C%20reaching%20102%20million%20people>.

⁵⁸ The World Bank, *Deep Structural Reforms Guided by Evidence Are Urgently Needed to Lift Millions of Nigerians Out of Poverty, says New World Bank Report*, <https://worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/21/afw-deep-structural-reforms-guided-by-evidence-are-urgently-needed-to-lift-millions-of-nigerians-out-of-poverty>.

⁵⁹ Africanews, *Lack of jobs responsible more for violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa – UNDP*, <https://africanews.com/2023/02/08/lack-of-jobs-responsible-more-for-violent-extremism-in-sub-saharan-africa-undp/>.

⁶⁰ Freedom C. Onuoha, *Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?*, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why_do_Youth_Join_Boko_Haram.pdf; Adesoji Adelaja, Justin George, *Is Youth Unemployment Related to Domestic Terrorism?*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26940038>; Valeria Izzi, *Promoting Decent Employment for African Youth as a Peacebuilding Strategy*, https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_744700.pdf.

⁶¹ Anietie Ewang, *Student in Nigeria Murdered Over Blasphemy Allegation: Ensure Justice, Abolish Blasphemy Laws*, <https://hrw.org/news/2022/05/16/student-nigeria-murdered-over-blasphemy-allegation>.

⁶² BBC News Africa, *The cost of being an atheist*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=uoHCqjR-Dts>.

⁶³ Jideofor Adibe, *Christians in Nigeria feel under attack: why it’s a complicated story*, <https://theconversation.com/christians-in-nigeria-feel-under-attack-why-its-a-complicated-story-186853>.

Empower Women Media⁶⁴ (a not-for-profit organisation based in the United States) is working with Nigerians across different religions and beliefs to produce an online course named *Live What You Believe Nigeria*.

Live What You Believe Nigeria is the replica of an existing online course⁶⁵ created to promote FoRB in the Middle East but with the Nigerian audience and context in mind. The online course aims to raise awareness of FoRB and its benefits and encourage advocacy in support of FoRB in Nigeria and across the wider region.

Has the AU done enough?

The disparity that exists between the proclamations made in the OAU/AU's legal institutions noted above and the recognition given to the significance of religious diversity, tolerance, and inclusion in Agenda 2063, on the one hand, and the growth of religious persecution in Africa, on the other, raises the following question: has the AU done enough to advance FoRB and curb religious persecution in Africa? A cursory examination of information available on the AU website suggests no.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Going on name alone, one AU institution that one would think carries significant if not primary responsibility for raising awareness about FoRB and religious persecution, and for encouraging and overseeing the kind of governance within AU member states that promotes and protects FoRB, is the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.⁶⁶

The Commission's mandate is to promote and protect human and peoples' rights, interpret its founding document (the ACHPR of 1981), and "[p]erform any other tasks which may be entrusted to it by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government."

To help fulfil its mandate,⁶⁷ and where necessary, to conduct work focused on specific human rights-related issues, the ACHPR has the option of creating "Special Mechanisms", including, for example, special rapporteurs, committees, and working groups.

⁶⁴ See Empower Women Media, <https://empowerwomen.media>.

⁶⁵ Empower Women Media, *Human Rights Training*, <https://empowerwomen.media/live-what-you-believe-online-training/>.

⁶⁶ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, <https://achpr.au.int/en>.

⁶⁷ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, *Mandate of the Commission*, <https://achpr.au.int/en/about/mandate>.

Undoubtedly, the work done by the 16 special mechanisms on record⁶⁸ will have been important, but none of these relate directly to FoRB or the pressing matter⁶⁹ of religious persecution in Africa.

Furthermore, the Commission sits for two ordinary sessions each year, up to 15 days in length, and for extraordinary sessions at the request of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission or the majority of the members of the Commission.

A scan of the resolutions⁷⁰ the Commission adopted over the last 10 years reveals references to “freedom of expression”, “freedom of association and assembly” and “sexual violence” (often a component of religious persecution)⁷¹ but no mention is made of FoRB, religion, or religious persecution in Africa.

Citizens and Diaspora Organizations Directorate (CIDO)

At first glance, the AU’s Citizens and Diaspora Organizations Directorate (CIDO),⁷² “responsible for implementing the African Union’s vision of a people-oriented and driven organization based on a partnership between governments, civil society and diasporas,” appears more promising.

Two noteworthy AU initiatives that fall within CIDO’s ambit are the Interfaith Dialogue Forum (IFDF)⁷³ and the Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove)⁷⁴.

Interfaith Dialogue Forum (IFDF)

A reading of the IFDF’s mandate suggests that where the ACHPR has failed to give appropriate attention to FoRB and Africans who suffer from religious persecution, including of a violent nature, the IFDF is positioned to do this and encourage the same in the Commission and other relevant AU institutions.

⁶⁸ African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, *Special Mechanisms*, <https://achpr.au.int/en/special-mechanisms>.

⁶⁹ OpenDoors, *Alarming growth in the worldwide persecution of Christians*, <https://open-doors.org.za/media-release-alarming-growth-in-the-worldwide-persecution-of-christians/>.

⁷⁰ African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, *Sessions Statistics Table*, <https://achpr.au.int/en/sessions-statistics-table>.

⁷¹ Morgan Lee, *For Christian Women, Persecution Looks Like Rape*, <https://christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-web-only/rape-sexual-assault-for-women-persecution-looks-like.html>.

⁷² African Union, *Diaspora & Civil Society Engagement*, <https://au.int/diaspora-civil-society-engagement>.

⁷³ African Union, *Interfaith Dialogue Forum*, <https://au.int/interfaith-dialogue-forum>.

⁷⁴ African Union, *About iDove*, <https://au.int/idove/about>.

The IFDF is responsible for ensuring that “religions and faith-based entities are fully engaged in supporting peace, and human rights in the attainment of inclusive development in Africa.”

According to the IFDF’s designated webpage, four forums have been held to discuss “relevant issues related to Africa’s development advancing justice peace and security in Africa.”⁷⁵ Also, listed among the six activities that the IFDF busies itself with, one is “awareness raising and advocacy”.

However, whether the “relevant issues” discussed at the IFDF have included conversations explicitly or directly about FoRB and religious persecution in Africa, isn’t clear. Nor is it evident on the webpage what precisely the IFDF has been raising awareness about or advocating for.

On the digital fact sheet⁷⁶ listing the IFDF’s achievements, there is no reference to work focused on FoRB or religious persecution in Africa.

If the IFDF does have FoRB and religious persecution under its focus, another important consideration would be the extent to which IFDF recommendations filter through to the relevant institutions in the AU for execution.

While the IFDF may involve significant work, more transparent communication, including the provision of forum minutes and project impact reports, for example, will help inspire confidence about AU efforts among those concerned about the state of FoRB and religious persecution in Africa.

Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove)

iDove was a pilot project launched jointly by CIDO and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)⁷⁷ for the period August 2016 to November 2019.⁷⁸ GIZ is Germany’s state-owned agency that promotes “international cooperation for sustainable development and international educational work”. According to its designated webpage, iDove uses “innovative youth-led approaches to highlight the soft power of religion in PVE [preventing violent extremism].”

iDove was a laudable and necessary endeavour, if only because it focused on “the root causes rather than on the symptoms of violent extremism.” Should future opportunities arise to run the same or a similar programme, these should be taken.

The programme would have indirectly encouraged FoRB in Africa. After all, religion’s soft power cannot be effectively deployed outside of FoRB.

⁷⁵ African Union, *Interfaith Dialogue Forum*, <https://au.int/interfaith-dialogue-forum>.

⁷⁶ Factsheet: *Fostering the Engagement of the Faith Community in Development*, <https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38750-doc-faithcommunitiesfactsheetfin.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, <https://giz.de/>.

⁷⁸ Factsheet: *Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove)*, <https://au.int/en/documents/20200624/factsheet-interfaith-dialogue-violent-extremism-idove>.

Unfortunately, neither religious persecution nor FoRB feature as topics in the iDove training manual⁷⁹ or its programme report⁸⁰.

The plight of Africa's victims of violence based on religion or belief would have been better served if iDove highlighted religious persecution as one dimension of violent extremism in Africa and if it sensitised programme participants to the concept of FoRB and its benefits.

AU meetings and related documents

AU meetings that gave rise to reports and plans where one would also hope to find references to FoRB and/or religious persecution, but in which there are no such references, include the Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Africa⁸¹ (delivered at the Peace and Security Council 455th meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government on 2 September 2014), the September 2002 AU high-level inter-governmental meeting on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa (this gave rise to the Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa)⁸² and the 16th Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa held on 28 May 2022 (this gave rise to the Declaration on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa)⁸³.

From 19 to 21 October 2021, the AU Commission Directorate of Women, Gender and Youth, the UN, and European Union (EU) jointly convened a meeting held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, between the AU, regional faith-based organizations, and communities of traditional leaders “to strengthen their engagement in prevention and response to violence against women and girls and harmful practices in Africa.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹ iDove – *Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism: Youth Preventing Violent Extremism in their Communities*, Training and Training of Trainers Manual including Teaching Material, <https://jiliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/iDove-Manual.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism – iDove: *Stocktaking Report 2017–2019*, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38883-doc-idove_stocktaking_report_2017-2019_final.pdf.

⁸¹ African Union, *Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on Terrorism and violent extremism in Africa*, https://au.int/sites/default/files/speeches/25397-sp-psc-rpt-terrorism-nairobi-2-09-2014-pdf_0.pdf.

⁸² African Union, *Plan of action of the African union high-level inter-governmental meeting on The prevention and combating of terrorism in Africa*, <https://peaceau.org/en/article/plan-of-action-of-the-african-union-high-level-inter-governmental-meeting-on-the-prevention-and-combating-of-terrorism-in-africa>.

⁸³ African Union, *Declaration on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa*, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220528/declaration-terrorism-and-unconstitutional-changes-government-africa>.

⁸⁴ African Union, *Meeting of the African Union (AU), regional faith-based organizations, and communities of traditional leaders: to strengthen their engagement in prevention and response to violence against women and girls and harmful practices in Africa*,

While a member of the EU Delegation to the AU recognised at the meeting the need to “engage men, boys, traditional and religious leaders at the grassroots level”⁸⁵ in an attempt at mitigating violence against women and girls, nothing appears to have been said about the overlap⁸⁶ between religious persecution and violence against women and girls or about FoRB, even though a positive correlation exists between FoRB and women’s empowerment.⁸⁷

More recently, in June, the first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue⁸⁸ was held in Marrakesh, Morocco. Representing the AU as President of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), H.E. Hon. Chief Fortune Charumbira, did well in his address⁸⁹ to encourage conference delegates in their promotion of tolerance, inclusivity, peace, respect for diversity, and societal transformation.

While each of these themes and principles are relevant to FoRB and the realities facing Africa’s victims of violence based on religion or belief, FoRB and human rights advocates would like to have heard the PAP President say something specifically about FoRB and religious persecution in the continent.

Finally, because taking decisions on important AU matters forms part of its mandate, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government that meet for ordinary sessions twice a year and for extraordinary sessions “on request by a Member State and approved by a two-thirds majority of Member States”, should, if it takes only Agenda 2063 seriously, be talking about FoRB and religious persecution in Africa. However, a search of the “Decisions and Declarations of the Assembly”⁹⁰ made over the last ten years (23 meetings in total) suggests this is not the case.

Still, hope remains. On 28 February this year, the AU Commission hosted a “Celebration of the World Interfaith Harmony Week”⁹¹ with a theme that included “Advancing...Freedom of Religion or Belief”. While outcomes and impact of the celebration remain unclear, it would, at the very least, have raised awareness about FoRB.

<https://au.int/en/newsevents/20211019/meeting-african-union-au-regional-faith-based-organizations-and-communities>.

⁸⁵ African Union, *Traditional, religious and civil society leaders of Africa vow to take bold action to end violence against women and girls in Africa*, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20211019/traditional-religious-and-civil-society-leaders-africa-vow-take-bold-action>.

⁸⁶ Philip Loft, Tim Robinson, *Gender-specific religious persecution*, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2022-0057/CDP-2022-0057.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Marie Juul Petersen, *Freedom of religion or belief and women’s rights*, https://humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Brief_no4_03_FINAL-a.pdf.

⁸⁸ Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, <https://pcid.ma>.

⁸⁹ African Union, *Religious and political leaders must use influence to promote tolerance, foster peace and transform societies: PAP President tells Conference on Interfaith Dialogue*, <https://pap.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2023-06-14/religious-and-political-leaders-must-use-influence-promote-tolerance>.

⁹⁰ African Union, *Decisions & Declarations of the Assembly*, <https://au.int/en/decisions/assembly>.

⁹¹ African Union, *Celebration of the World Interfaith Harmony Week*, <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20230228/celebration-world-interfaith-harmony-week>.

In closing, I draw on two separate but related observations the ISS has made: firstly, the “AU response to terrorism and violent extremism is not as holistic or coordinated as it should be”⁹² and secondly, “[a]fter two decades of violent extremism, fundamental elements in preventing the threat remain absent from AU plans.”⁹³

If the AU’s response to terrorism and violent extremism is going to be more holistic, the notion of FoRB and the realities of religious persecution in Africa, especially of the violent kind, will have to feature more prominently across AU declarations and activities.

Fundamental to AU initiatives aimed at countering terrorism and violent extremism, and by implication, therefore, the violent victimisation of Africans based on religion or belief, is education on the concept of FoRB and the advantages of living in a space where FoRB is a reality.

The issues of FoRB and religious persecution need to appear clearly and be pursued explicitly on the AU agenda. Religious and other groups (and their members) who believe in FoRB and who recognise the harm that accompanies religious persecution have a duty to help make this a reality.

This will set the AU on track towards properly commemorating the memory of those who have fallen victim to violence based on religion or belief and to preventing Africa’s people becoming victims of the same kind of violence in the future.

⁹² Institute for Security Studies (ISS) PSC Report, *Terrorism and violent extremism expand despite AU efforts*, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/terrorism-and-violent-extremism-expand-despite-au-efforts>.

⁹³ Institute for Security Studies (ISS) PSC Report, *Africa’s approach to countering terrorism still misses the mark*, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africas-approach-to-countering-terrorism-still-misses-the-mark>.

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