

Africa and the Blood of Christians

Doug Bandow

March 28, 2019

Nigeria has the largest economy and population in Africa. Unfortunately, it is also home to growing violence against Christians.

The Religious Liberty Partnership recently hosted a conference of international activists in Abuja to both show solidarity with Nigeria's Christians and consider strategies to battle discrimination and persecution. Stories told by Nigerian participants highlighted the threat posed by violent extremism in a country that otherwise seems destined to become a regional and perhaps world leader.

Unfortunately, Nigeria is not alone. Africa has become an epicenter of religious persecution. Much of the continent is inhospitable to those who worship a different god or the same god differently. Open Doors estimates that 245 million out of 631 million African Christians currently experience high levels of persecution, up from 215 million last year.

Africa remains far from the center of U.S. foreign policy. However, it has begun a long march forward, with democracy expanding and economies growing. That makes the fight against religious extremism and intolerance ever more important. Otherwise stability and peace are likely to remain out of reach, including in Nigeria.

The status of religious freedom varies widely by region and country. The most obvious difference is between the Arabic north and largely black Africa.

For instance, the latest report from the Aid to the Church in Need cites significant violations of religious liberty in Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, and Tanzania. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom focuses on the worst of the worst, highlighting the cases of the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Nigeria, and Sudan.

Open Doors also lists the world's 50 worst persecutors. They include 14 African countries, home to "extreme" or "very high" levels of persecution: Algeria, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia.

The Pew Research Center separates government restrictions from social hostility, rating a dozen nations as having high or very high levels of state control on religion: Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Western Sahara. Eleven were on the high and very high social hostility lists: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon,

the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, and Uganda.

Egypt is on every list. Nigeria, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan are on all but one list. Algeria, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia are on multiple lists.

Nigeria may face the greatest challenge. Christians in some of its Muslim-majority states are treated like second-class citizens. Boko Haram and other radical forces, most notably Fulani herdsmen—ethnic and tribal and religious divisions largely fall together—regularly attack Christian villages. Tens of thousands have been killed and millions of refugees created. One of the most poignant stories involves a 15-year-old schoolgirl named Leah Sharibu, kidnapped last year by Boko Haram with 104 of her classmates and denied release along with the rest when she refused to renounce her faith.

Such assaults have become routine. With government unable to stop the killing, the temptation to strike back indiscriminately is growing. Yunusa Nmadu of the Evangelical Church Winning All worries: “We are at the precipice. If Nigeria goes into civil war, all of West Africa is gone.”

Algeria enforces Islam as a state religion, promulgates blasphemy laws, discriminates against converts, and closes churches. These measures, explains Open Doors, “make proselytizing and public expression of the Christian faith dangerous as well.” In the Central African Republic, USCIRF cited escalating “targeted killings based on religious identity.” Muslims there also cite discrimination and have suffered from reprisals launched by nominally Christian “self-defense” militias.

In Egypt, Copts are subject to attacks by mobs and terrorists, face legal discrimination, and are targeted by anti-blasphemy laws. Converts face social and legal pressure. Eritrea authorizes only four churches, which it closely regulates; it has raided numerous churches and arrested thousands of people for their faith. USCIRF details “systematic, ongoing egregious religious freedom violations” there.

Ethiopia has used its Anti-Terrorism Proclamation against people of faith. In rural areas where Muslims predominate, Christians face discrimination. In Kenya, members of the Somali Islamic extremist group al-Shabab have launched terrorist attacks and the government has sought to extend its control over religious groups. In Libya, competing governments have created chaos, allowing extremist groups to operate, attacking Christians and other religious minorities. Christians worship underground; women are at risk of sexual assault and men of forced labor. Religious minorities are subject to laws that ban insults to Islam and “instigating division.” In Mauritania, citizenship is limited to Muslims and renouncing one’s faith is punishable by death. Sharia law and anti-blasphemy statutes apply. Radical jihadist thought is spreading.

Somalia’s central government collapsed in 1991 and what laws exist reflect Sharia. Conversion is variously punished and prohibited. Islamist radicalism is spreading and religious minorities must practice their faith underground. Al-Shabab has expressed its determination to “hunt down” non-Muslims in areas it controls. In Sudan, religious minorities suffer systematic government harassment and the confiscation and destruction of church properties. Converts face prosecution and social pressure; religious offenses typically are judged by Islamic law. The regime has targeted churches based in the Nuba Mountains, home to a long-lasting insurgency. In Tunisia,

according to Open Doors, “life within Islamic society comes with hostility and daily pressure.” Believers fear the impact of Islamic State radicals returning from Mideast combat.

A number of these countries are North African and Muslim. A couple of them are closely divided, such as Nigeria and Eritrea. A couple are even Christian-majority nations.

The most important animating factor, though, is violent, repressive Islam. Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan are old-line, traditional Islamic oppressors, while rising radicalism has triggered growing violence in majority-Islamic countries Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, and Tunisia. This same force has wreaked havoc in divided Nigeria and majority-Christian Kenya. Similarly brutal are jihadist organizations active in the majority-Christian Central African Republic.

Notes Open Doors:

While the violence from Islamic State and other Islamic militants has mostly disappeared from the Middle East, their loss of territory there means that fighters have dispersed to a larger number of countries not only in the region, but, increasingly, into sub-Saharan Africa. Their radical ideology has inspired, or infiltrated, numerous splinter groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a deadly group that broke away from Nigeria’s Boko Haram.

U.S. involvement has also created and exacerbated persecutions. For instance, the overthrow of Moammar Gaddafi, backed up by American and European forces, led to chaos and a vacuum in which Islamist radicals have prospered. Washington’s enthusiastic embrace of Cairo, which slackened only slightly after the 2014 coup, insulated the al-Sisi regime as it mistreated its sizable Coptic population along with most everyone else. Politics is the chief oppressor in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and an important factor in Sudan, which has killed promiscuously to suppress local and regional separatists. Authoritarian governments fear any opposition, especially one claiming a transcendent allegiance.

Africa is moving forward, but religious violence and persecution threaten its future.

Unfortunately, there is little the United States can do, other than observe the Hippocratic Oath: first, do no harm. Misguided policies in the Mideast have created blowback in Africa. But even a more restrained, less destructive foreign policy will not end Islamic extremism or tyranny, the two most important causes of African religious persecution.

Africa needs reform. Politics needs to incorporate democracy and tolerance. Governments need to become more competent, honest, and responsive. Economies need to better deliver growth and opportunity. People need to reject extremism and cooperate. Although Christians bear the brunt of the persecution, in most African countries, only a handful benefit from the current strife. An end to religious persecution would be a gain for the vast majority.

Americans and other people of goodwill can help by backing peacemakers with resources and prayers. Africa has much to offer in the future. But success requires addressing the continent’s internal crises, of which religious persecution is one of the worst.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics and Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.