

2.1.1. Blasphemy laws

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Nigeria’s blasphemy laws, particularly in Northern states under sharia jurisdiction, has remained a source of significant human rights violations[76] (see 2.18.1. Justice system for more information on legal pluralism). The 1999 Nigerian Constitution[77] guarantees key fundamental rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion (Section 38), and freedom of expression (Section 39), allowing individuals to express their beliefs. Although the Constitution does not criminalise blasphemy,[78] it permits the application of sharia and traditional law courts for noncriminal proceedings at the state level – but it does not compel all citizens to abide by them.[79] In contrast, sharia law explicitly criminalises blasphemy. Particularly in Kano State,[80] Sharia Penal Code (Section 382) prescribes harsh penalties for blasphemy, including death sentence for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. This legal divergence has resulted in conflicting jurisdictional overlaps between secular and sharia courts in the aforementioned 12 states where sharia law is implemented.[81]

Nigerian authorities, in northern states,[82] have continued to imprison individuals accused of blasphemy and have frequently failed to act against perpetrators of violence related to blasphemy allegations.[83] In 2024, Mubarak Bala, a prominent Nigerian atheist, was released after over four years in prison for blasphemy accusations related to a 2020 Facebook post. Convicted under both sharia law and secular law in Kano, he had originally been sentenced to 24 years, later reduced on appeal. Following his release, Bala is reported to live in a safe house due to ongoing threats to his life.[84]

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a 25-year-old musician, was sentenced to death by hanging in August 2020 on charges of blasphemy after posting a song on WhatsApp. His case remains unresolved, with an appeal submitted to Nigeria’s Supreme Court in November 2022 still pending a hearing date.[85] In February 2025, the European Parliament passed a resolution urging Nigerian authorities to release Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, drop all charges, and ensure his rights and safety, along with the release of others facing blasphemy allegations. It notes that blasphemy laws, including those under sharia law in some northern states, violate international human rights obligations and Nigeria’s Constitution.[86] In April 2025, a landmark ruling by the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) judged that the blasphemy provisions in Kano State law are inconsistent with Nigeria’s regional and international human rights obligations, particularly with regard to freedom of expression. The case was filed by the Incorporated Trustees of Expression Now Human Rights Initiative, a Nigerian NGO which documented instances of individuals arbitrarily arrested, detained, or sentenced to death for allegedly blasphemous expressions. The case also detailed incidents of vigilante violence,[87]

including mob killings of accused persons carried out with apparent impunity.88

Incidents of mob violence and vigilante justice related to alleged religious blasphemy in Northern Nigeria have been reported, with significant impacts on social stability, human rights, and the rule of law. The prevalence of vigilante justice in the region reportedly reflects widespread distrust of formal judicial institutions and a preference for swift, community-based resolution.89

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