

An unprecedented number of international religious freedom advocates sign letter demanding freedom of young Nigerian

Church of Scientology joined 209 international human rights and religious freedom advocates, parliamentarians, artists and others to save man from death penalty

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, June 8, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In a letter addressed to the President of Nigeria, the international human rights and religious freedom community joined in expressing grave concern over Nigeria's continuing persecution of prisoners of conscience for "blasphemy" allegations.

Over 200 advocates are calling for the immediate release of Nigerian prisoner of conscience, [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#),

remarking that no person should be sentenced to death for personal expression. Mr. Sharif-Aminu was criminally charged as a result of a WhatsApp message he sent.

The death penalty remains a legal sanction for blasphemy in Nigeria and continues to be imposed throughout the country. In 2019, over 54 death sentences were recorded. In April 2023, 3298 people were under death sentence. In Nigeria, the 2004 National Study Group on Death Penalty and the 2007 Presidential Commission on the Administration of Justice both stressed that the Nigerian criminal justice system cannot guarantee a fair trial and called for a moratorium on the death penalty.

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu is a 22-year-old Islamic gospel singer belonging to the minority Tijaniyyah Sufi Islamic sect. On August 10, 2020, he was [convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death](#) by a Kano State Sharia court for reportedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad in a song shared in a WhatsApp message.



Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, 22, convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death for a WhatsApp message with song lyrics

Mr. Sharif-Aminu has remained in prison since March of 2020. In January 2021, a higher court in Kano State overturned Sharif-Aminu's conviction and ordered his case to be retried due to irregularities in the original trial. More recently in August 2022, the Kano State Appeals Court affirmed Sharif-Aminu's order for retrial and in November 2022, Sharif-Aminu filed an appeal with the Supreme Court.

The international community, consisting of prominent parliamentarians from Europe; a former congressman from the United States; organizations from Vietnam, Germany, the United States, South Africa and Nigeria; and faith groups including Muslims, Catholics, Christians, and many other religious denominations, are demanding that Mr. Sharif-Aminu be released, and that basic freedoms be protected for all peoples in Nigeria as stated in international religious freedom and human rights covenants.

“Mr. 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 peacefully sharing his beliefs with others,” the letter stated.

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No matter our faith, politics or nationality we all must stand together to protect our rights and those of others.”

Rev. Susan Taylor of the Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Rev. Susan Taylor of the Church of Scientology National Affairs Office, who signed onto the letter and works with colleagues on the International Religious Freedom Roundtable to help bring this message to every country, said, “No matter our faith, politics or nationality we all must stand together to protect our rights and those of others.”

In 2020, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner Frederick A. Davie announced that he had adopted Yahaya Sharif-Aminu as a prisoner of conscience and advocates for him as part of USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). “Sharif-Aminu's blasphemy conviction and death sentence are a violation of international human rights law and Article 38 of the Nigerian Constitution,” Commissioner Davie stated. “Authorities must overturn this sentence and ensure that Sharif-Aminu's right to religious freedom is protected.”

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.

In late 2020, the bipartisan House Resolution 512, calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws, passed the US House of Representatives by an overwhelming vote of 386-3. The resolution called for the immediate release of religious prisoners of conscience worldwide. As more than 80 countries use blasphemy laws to persecute and imprison religious minorities and dissenters, the House asserted the essential importance of freedom of religion and liberty of conscience globally.

Rev. Susan Taylor
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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

21 Wilberforce
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
President
Nigerian Centre of PEN International (PEN Nigeria)

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