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Safeguarding Religious Sites Amid Escalation of Insecurity in Nigeria: A Call for Legislative Action

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Executive Summary

Nigeria's rising insecurity has increasingly targeted churches, mosques, and other religious spaces, transforming houses of worship from sanctuaries into vulnerable sites of extremist and communal violence. This trend is driven by weaponized religious ideologies, weak security architecture, political manipulation of faith, and deep-seated socio-economic grievances that fuel recruitment and radicalization. Religious locations remain soft targets due to their openness, limited physical protection, and the symbolic impact attackers seek from mass-casualty assaults. Equally, legal, institutional, and community-level mechanisms for safeguarding these spaces remain fragmented and under-resourced. Deliberate attacks on religious sites not only endanger lives but also deepen mistrust, erode social cohesion, and threaten religious freedom. In February 2026, suspected bandits reportedly demanded a 100 million naira levy from clerics in Utouno community, Ngaski LGA, Kebbi State, threatening violence if unpaid. Similar practices have been reported in Sokoto and Zamfara States, illustrating the transformation of banditry from sporadic attacks into a systematic mechanism for revenue extraction and territorial control. Such actions undermine constitutional protections, particularly Section 38 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, which safeguards freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This brief calls for urgent action to systematize the protection of religious spaces as a core component of national security and democratic resilience. In view of this, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Strengthen Legislation: Amend Part V of the Criminal Code to classify extortion targeting religious institutions or events as an aggravated offence, with enhanced penalties during major religious observances.
- Enhance Accountability & Prosecution: Ensure enforcement of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, to prosecute organized extortion networks and provide protection for victims and witnesses.
- Legislators may wish to enact laws prohibiting or restricting sectarian doctrines and hate speech that incite violence against religious communities, especially in formal and informal settings. This could include mandating inter-faith and anti-extremism education programs in schools and religious institutions, supported by legislative backing and budgetary provisions.
- NASS may wish to consider enacting legislation to integrate community-generated threat reports, particularly from religious communities and traditional rulers into national early-warning and rapid-response systems, ensuring systematic action on such intelligence.

1. Background

Rising insecurity across the globe has increasingly targeted places of worship, turning churches, mosques, temples, and other religious spaces into frontline sites of violence and fear. In Nigeria, militant Islamist groups and extremist herding militias have repeatedly attacked



these places of worship killing thousands, abducting clergy and schoolchildren, and destroying these institutions leading to human-rights violations¹.

This escalation of violence against religious spaces has transformed houses of worship from symbols of sanctuary into potential targets of communal, sectarian, or ideological attacks². In many contexts, religious sites are attacked not only for their symbolic value but also because they gather vulnerable populations often women, children, and youths during worship, making them attractive for mass-harm operations, particularly across parts of the North-West and North-Central regions. In February 2026, suspected bandits reportedly imposed a 100 million naira levy on clerics in Utouno community, Ngaski Local Government Area of Kebbi State, threatening violence if the demand was not met³. The ultimatum which was delivered during the holy month of Ramadan, a period characterized by increased religious gatherings and Tafsir sessions, has generated immense fear within the community, despite assurances by the state government.

This incident reflects a pattern in which non-state armed groups impose illegal “taxes” on vulnerable rural communities, religious leaders, and farmers to finance operations and consolidate territorial control. A 2025 report published by ThisDay newspaper indicates that armed bandits operating in Sokoto and Zamfara States have reportedly demanded up to ₦100 million at intervals in exchange for guaranteeing farmers’ safety⁴, illustrating the transformation of banditry into a systematized economic enterprise. What began as sporadic violence has evolved into coercive revenue extraction mechanism, blurring the boundaries between insurgency, organized crime, and local banditry. Such practices undermine constitutional guarantees, particularly Section 38 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, which protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion⁵.

Although extortion, intimidation, and terrorism financing are criminalized under Nigeria’s Criminal Code Act, Penal Code Act, and the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, enforcement deficits remain evident especially in rural areas. Where armed groups successfully impose levies without swift prosecution, impunity becomes entrenched, weakening deterrence and eroding public trust in state protection mechanisms. Strengthening legislative oversight and clarifying statutory provisions on coercive levies against religious communities, therefore, constitute an urgent policy priority.

¹ Boyi, J B 2020, ‘The Response of Christians to Islamic Violence in Northern Nigeria. *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* 1(1) 78-97

² Dugato M. and Carbone C. (2024), *Threats and vulnerabilities of places of worship*, Milan: Transcrime – Joint Research Centre on Innovation and Crime.

³ Bello, H. (2026, February 22). Suspected bandits impose N100m levy on clerics in Kebbi community. *Daily Post*. <https://dailypost.ng/2026/02/22/suspected-bandits-impose-n100m-levy-on-clerics-in-kebbi-community/>.

⁴ Mathew, D. (2025, November 22). Farmers in Zamfara, Sokoto pay “harvest taxes” to bandits to access farmlands. *TheTimes*. [Farmers in Zamfara, Sokoto pay "harvest taxes" to bandits to access farmlands](#)

⁵ Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)*. Government of Nigeria.



2. Issues

Despite government efforts, Nigeria continues to wrestle with rising insecurity around religious spaces, a crisis driven by a convergence of extremist ideologies, deep-seated communal tensions, weak state security capacity, and the political manipulation of religion institution. These factors collectively transform churches, mosques, temples, and shrines into soft targets for armed groups, terrorists, and criminal actors intent on achieving symbolic impact and inflicting mass casualties. Socio-economic grievances, widespread youth unemployment, and entrenched ethnic or sectarian polarization provide fertile ground for recruitment and radicalization, while hate speech and online incitement normalize religion-based violence and progressively erode mutual trust among communities. The sole responsibility of every government is the protection of lives and properties of its citizens. This is incorporated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as amended, section 14 (b) which states that “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government⁶. It is against this backdrop that this brief is anchored.

Drivers

- i. **Amplification of extremist and sectarian ideologies:** Extremist and sectarian ideologies are becoming increasingly pronounced, with radical groups weaponizing religion to deliberately target churches, mosques, and temples in pursuit of sectarian objectives, to intimidate “out-group” communities, or to ignite broader communal conflict.
- ii. **Rising hate-based and identity-motivated violence:** A growing proportion of attacks on houses of worship is fueled by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, as perpetrators seek to punish, marginalize, or erase specific faith communities from public life.
- iii. **Weak state capacity and governance failures:** a phenomenon of overstretched security forces, fragmented intelligence, and weak rule-of-law enforcement creates conditions under which armed groups and criminals operate with relative impunity around religious sites, thereby deepening insecurity.
- iv. **Political manipulation of religion:** Politicians and interest groups sometimes exploit religious differences to mobilize support, fostering polarized environments in which religious spaces become flashpoints and political proxies in broader power struggles.
- v. **Spread of incitement and hate speech online:** Social media and digital platforms magnify hate speech, conspiracy theories, and calls to violence, desensitizing audiences and providing ideological fuel for lone-actor or cell-based attacks on religious venues.
- vi. **Economic marginalization and social grievances:** Widespread poverty, unemployment, corruption, and perceived discrimination generate deep-seated grievances that extremist recruiters exploit, reframing religious rhetoric as justification for violence against rival communities and their places of worship.
- vii. **Growing international and regional contagion effects:** Patterns of attacks on religious sites and associated extremist tactics spread across national borders, as global jihadist networks and local militias replicate successful models, resulting in similar assaults on churches, mosques, and synagogues in multiple regions.

⁶ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN, 1999).



3. Policy Recommendations

Based on the above, the National Assembly is respectfully urged take the following actions:

- i. Oversight & Investigation: Establish a Joint Parliamentary Oversight Mechanism to examine the prevalence of coercive levies in high-risk states and assess security agencies' response frameworks, with a mandatory periodic reporting.
- ii. Strengthening Legislation: Amend relevant provisions of Part V of the Nigerian Criminal Code to explicitly classify extortion targeting religious institutions or events as an aggravated offence, with enhanced penalties especially during major religious observances.
- iii. Improve Accountability & Prosecution: Strengthen enforcement of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, to ensure that organized extortion networks are prosecuted under terrorism financing and organized crime provisions, alongside victim-witness protection measures.
- iv. Legislators may wish to strengthen security-sector and firearms laws to curb illegal arms trafficking and proliferation, particularly in ungoverned forested areas often exploited by armed groups.
- v. The National Assembly may wish to allocate dedicated funding for enhancing security infrastructure (e.g., CCTV, perimeter fencing, and access controls) at major churches, mosques, and pilgrimage sites, thereby complementing security agencies' efforts and community vigilance in addressing threats.
- vi. Legislators may wish to enact laws prohibiting or restricting sectarian doctrines and hate speech that incite violence against religious communities, especially in formal and informal settings. This could include mandating inter-faith and anti-extremism education programs in schools and religious institutions, supported by legislative backing and budgetary provisions.
- vii. Legislators may consider enacting legislation to integrate community-generated threat reports particularly from religious communities and traditional rulers into national early-warning and rapid-response systems, ensuring systematic action on such intelligence.

4. Conclusion

Addressing Nigeria's rising insecurity requires the National Assembly to prioritize robust legislative protections for religious spaces churches, mosques, synagogues, and pilgrimage sites as essential bastions of faith, community, and national unity. By enacting laws to criminalize attacks on worshippers, curb illegal arms in ungoverned areas, fund security enhancements like CCTV and fencing, ban hate-inciting doctrines, and integrate community threat reports into early-warning systems, lawmakers can complement security agencies and vigilante efforts. These targeted reforms will not only mitigate extremism and restore safety but also reinforce democratic resilience, ensuring religious freedom endures as a cornerstone of Nigeria's pluralistic society.

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