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Religion meets realpolitik

Trump threatens Nigeria with military action over alleged persecution of Christians. But the violence in the country has entirely different causes

The international condemnation of the persecution of Christians has long been one of Donald Trump and his administration's favourite issues. The latest target of his verbal attacks is Nigeria. Indeed, just last week, the US redesignated Nigeria a 'country of particular concern' (CPC) for its systematic violations of religious freedom. The CPC list includes China, Myanmar, North Korea, Russia and Pakistan. At the same time, Trump threatened to stop all US aid to Nigeria and even warned of possible military action if the country did not protect its Christians better.

The catalyst for this rhetoric appears to have been reports published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and a number of other organisations. It is undisputed that Christian civilians are been violently killed in Nigeria, and that this has been happening for some years. The crucial factor, however, is that a great many Muslims are suffering the same fate. The main cause is not religious persecution but widespread insecurity across the country. Nigeria faces several different conflicts, but religion is generally not central in any of them. It is often only invoked afterwards to describe the victims or parties to the conflict, with the original dispute rarely having anything to do with faith.

In northern Nigeria, Islamic terrorism, most notably carried out by Boko Haram and the West African offshoot of the Islamic State (IS), which is currently gaining influence, has claimed the lives of countless Muslim civilians. The region is seeing repeated invasions of entire villages, with Muslims who reject the extremist ideology of the terrorist groups being murdered. The country's north has suffered years of neglect and this, along with the weak presence of the Nigerian state, has resulted in a power vacuum. This situation is now being exploited by the IS, which has modern equipment, including drones, enabling it to carry out targeted attacks primarily against the police and military facilities.

A closer military cooperation

The conflict between sedentary Christian farmers and nomadic Muslim herders, which is often depicted as religious, is in fact, at its core, about competition for arable and pasture land — a conflict that has been further exacerbated by climate change. The herders mostly belong to the Fulani ethnic group, while the farmers are from other groups. Against this backdrop, in recent years, there have been brutal, sometimes targeted attacks, for example on churches. But this violence also has a distinct ethnic dimension. In a country that is home to more than 300 different ethnic groups, membership in an ethnic group is often a more important aspect of identity than religion. The attacks, as well as some of the acts of retaliation, can therefore not be separated from the underlying conflicts over land and resources.

Moreover, in many parts of the country, gang crime and kidnappings define everyday life. This is primarily a result of weak government control, a lack of law enforcement and deep economic tensions rather than being religiously motivated. The government of President Bola Tinubu, which took office in 2023 promising to combat the country's massive insecurity, has failed. Its handling of Nigeria's many security crises seems sluggish and complacent — barely distinguishing it from previous governments.

In Nigeria, reactions to Trump's threats have varied greatly. Many recall his grandiose announcements about Greenland's role, which were ultimately followed by very little action. Even now, many see his statements more as domestic political symbolism — a signal to his Christian, sometimes fundamentalist followers.

The question of sovereignty is particularly sensitive in West Africa at the moment.

In view of the widespread dissatisfaction with Tinubu's government, which has so far failed to noticeably improve living conditions despite the country's significant economic potential, some Nigerians are even expressing, at times sarcastically, the desire for external intervention. Others strongly oppose any outside interference, citing the disastrous record of previous US operations in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, as well as the negative experience of French involvement in West Africa.

In light of Nigeria's resource wealth, especially rare earths and other raw materials, the sudden focus on the alleged persecution of Christians raises questions, specifically, might this merely be a pretext for geo-economic

interests?

The Nigerian government has made it clear that, it is, in principle, interested in closer security policy cooperation and joint military operations, but only if these are coordinated and agreed by the government itself and do not impact national sovereignty.

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The question of sovereignty is particularly sensitive in West Africa at the moment: Mali's Burkina Faso's and Niger's withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was also staged as a protest against Western influence. Similarly, in Senegal, the new president owed much of his election victory to his strongly anti-French rhetoric, with France having since withdrawn its troops from the country. American involvement in any way resembling France's former influence in the francophone states of West Africa would be completely inconceivable for most Nigerians.

For Germany and the rest of Europe, this means that Nigeria needs respect, not paternalism. Europe's message should be unequivocal. Full support for Nigerian sovereignty and recognition of its importance in West Africa, on the African continent and far beyond.

With its more than 230 million inhabitants and great wealth of raw materials, the 'Giant of Africa' is not just a demographic and economic heavyweight but also a key partner in the defence of a rules-based world order. Global questions about our future in a multipolar world – from migration to security in the Sahel, climate protection, energy supply and raw material security – can only be solved in close cooperation with countries like Nigeria, and not through senseless threats.



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