

Re-Designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern: Security, Diplomatic and Developmental Implications

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ABSTRACT

The 2025 re-designation of Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by the United States represents a pivotal moment in U.S.–Nigeria relations and carries broad implications for security, diplomacy, and development. The investigation adopted descriptive design, and the data used were mainly from secondary sources. The article examines the historical context of U.S. religious freedom policy, Nigeria's multi-layered conflict landscape, and the drivers behind the CPC decision. Among these are text books, internet, and journals. It evaluates the implications for bilateral relations, security cooperation, investment flows, and Nigeria's international reputation. The study argues that Nigeria's religious freedom challenges cannot be divorced from structural drivers of insecurity-terrorism, banditry, land conflicts, and weak state capacity. While the designation introduces risks ranging from diplomatic strain to economic uncertainty, it also opens opportunities for profound governance reforms. The paper concludes with policy recommendations focusing on diplomacy, security sector reform, institutional strengthening, and economic diversification.

Keywords: Religious freedom, Genocide, Foreign policy, Security, Diplomacy, Governance, Sanctions.

I. INTRODUCTION

In December 2025, the United States re-designated Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). This label, reserved for states deemed to have committed or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, marks a significant shift in U.S. policy and reopens debates on governance, rights protection, and national security within Nigeria. The re-designation has triggered widespread domestic and

international reactions, reflecting the sensitive intersection of religion, politics, diplomacy, and development. Nigeria's security dynamics, driven by terrorism, banditry, communal clashes, and governance weaknesses, make religious freedom concerns difficult to isolate. However, the CPC designation places the burden squarely on the Nigerian state to demonstrate measurable progress in protecting religious minorities and curbing abuses.

This study examines the logic behind the CPC decision, the broader implications for Nigeria, and the policy pathways that can reposition the country toward delisting and more stable international engagement.

Historical Context: IRFA and the CPC Mechanism

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 institutionalized religious freedom protection, a core pillar of U.S. foreign policy. Through annual reports and country designations, IRFA seeks to promote accountability, ensure transparency, and apply diplomatic pressure where states fail to uphold religious rights (Adams, 2017; Farr, 2018). CPC designation represents IRFA's highest warning, with potential consequences including diplomatic censure, withdrawal of support, targeted sanctions, and conditional security cooperation. Yet scholars note that the CPC mechanism often extends beyond religious concerns, intersecting with geopolitics, human rights, and state stability (Gill, 2022; Marshall & Shea, 2021).

Nigeria previously faced CPC designation in 2020, leading to strained bilateral relations before its removal in 2022. Its return to the list in 2025 signals renewed U.S. concern and highlights persistent governance gaps.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides the analytical structure through which a study explains relationships among key

concepts, variables, and processes. In examining Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), this framework situates religious freedom violations within broader and interrelated challenges of security, governance, diplomacy, and development. Rather than treating the CPC designation as a narrowly religious issue, the framework conceptualizes it as the outcome of complex structural, political, and institutional dynamics that collectively shape Nigeria's domestic stability and international standing.

At the core of this framework is the assumption that religious freedom violations are both a cause and a consequence of weak governance, insecurity, and socio-economic inequality. These factors interact in a cyclical manner, reinforcing state fragility and prompting international responses such as sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and policy reclassification.

Key Concepts and Variables

1. Country of Particular Concern (CPC) Designation

The CPC designation, as defined under international human rights norms and U.S. foreign policy instruments, refers to states that engage in or tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Conceptually, the CPC status functions as:

A normative instrument, reinforcing global human rights standards;

A foreign policy tool, shaping diplomatic engagement and sanctions regimes;

A signal, reflecting international perceptions of state capacity and legitimacy.

In Nigeria's case, the CPC designation extends beyond isolated religious incidents and reflects persistent patterns of violence, impunity, and state inability or unwillingness to protect vulnerable populations.

2. Security Environment

Security is a central variable in this framework. Nigeria's internal security challenges—such as insurgency, banditry, communal violence, and extremist movements—create conditions under which religious persecution thrives. Weak territorial control and poor intelligence coordination allow non-state actors to exploit religious identities for mobilization and violence.

Security breakdowns affect religious freedom in two key ways: They expose minority communities to attacks without adequate state protection. They erode trust in state institutions, encouraging self-help, vigilantism, and retaliatory violence. Thus, insecurity is both a driver and an amplifier of CPC-related concerns.

3. Governance and Institutional Capacity

Governance refers to the effectiveness of state institutions in enforcing laws, ensuring justice, and delivering public goods. Within this framework, weak governance manifests

through: Selective law enforcement; Politicization of religious and ethnic identities; Judicial inefficiency and impunity for perpetrators of violence. Institutional weakness undermines constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and belief. When state institutions fail to hold offenders accountable, violations become normalized, reinforcing international perceptions that Nigeria tolerates or enables religious repression.

4. Structural Inequality and Socio-economic Conditions

Structural inequality—expressed through poverty, unemployment, regional disparities, and limited access to education—forms a foundational layer of the framework. Marginalized populations are more susceptible to radicalization, sectarian mobilization, and religious conflict. Socio-economic deprivation contributes to: Competition over scarce resources framed along religious lines; Recruitment into extremist or violent groups; Public frustration with state authority. These conditions indirectly influence the CPC designation by sustaining the underlying environment in which religious freedom violations occur.

5. Diplomatic and Developmental Implications

The CPC designation has direct diplomatic consequences, including: Strained bilateral relations;

Reduced foreign aid or conditional assistance; Visa restrictions and diplomatic recalls. Developmentally, CPC status can discourage foreign investment, weaken donor confidence, and redirect resources from long-term development to crisis management. The framework conceptualizes these outcomes as feedback effects, where international pressure further challenges state capacity while also creating incentives for reform.

Interrelationship of Concepts

The conceptual framework emphasizes interconnectedness rather than linear causality. Insecurity fuels governance failure; governance failure exacerbates inequality; inequality intensifies conflict; and conflict produces religious freedom violations—ultimately triggering international responses such as CPC designation. These responses, in turn, reshape Nigeria's diplomatic and developmental trajectory.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored primarily in State Fragility Theory and complemented by Human Security Theory and Constructivist International Relations Theory.

State Fragility Theory

State Fragility Theory explains how weak institutions, limited monopoly over violence, and poor service delivery undermine a state's ability to protect citizens' rights. Nigeria's CPC designation is theoretically understood as a symptom of fragility rather than deliberate state persecution.

The state's inability to control non-state actors, enforce the rule of law, and ensure equal protection under the constitution aligns with key assumptions of this theory.

Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory broadens the concept of security beyond military threats to include freedom from fear and freedom from want. Religious freedom is conceptualized as a core component of human security. Persistent violations in Nigeria indicate failures not only of state security but also of socio-economic and political protection mechanisms.

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism highlights how international norms, identities, and perceptions shape state behavior. The CPC designation reflects global normative expectations regarding religious freedom. Nigeria's international identity is influenced by how external actors interpret domestic events, reinforcing the importance of compliance with international human rights norms to maintain diplomatic legitimacy.

III. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive design is adopted for this study. The data used were mainly from secondary sources. Among these are text books, internet, and journals.

Nigeria's Religious Freedom and Security Landscape

Nigeria's religious freedom issues intersect with deeply entrenched security challenges. Boko Haram's insurgency, banditry in the North-West, and farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt shape perceptions of religious insecurity. Weak policing, slow judicial processes, and mob-driven attacks exacerbate rights violations. However, the reality is complex: many violence patterns are linked not strictly to religion but to land scarcity, poverty, inequality, and climate pressures (Falola, 2020; Okoli & Uhembe, 2022). Misinterpreting these as purely religious can distort policy responses.

The U.S. State Department's (2024) report cited failures in prosecuting perpetrators of inter-religious violence, slow judicial processes in blasphemy cases, and inadequate protections for minority faiths as core reasons for CPC re-designation.

Implications of the 2025 CPC Re-Designation

Diplomatic Implications

CPC designation complicates U.S.-Nigeria relations, increasing scrutiny and requiring Nigeria to demonstrate verifiable progress. While not immediately triggering broad sanctions, the designation elevates Nigeria's risk of deeper diplomatic restrictions.

Security Cooperation Implications

Security partnerships, such as intelligence-sharing and arms transfers, may face delays or new conditions. Given Nigeria's current counterterrorism needs, disruptions could undermine national security operations.

Economic and Investment Implications

CPC designation may harm investor perceptions. Studies on sanctions show that even mild censure can depress capital flows (Peksen, 2019). Nigeria's FDI-dependent sectors, including extractives, telecoms, and manufacturing, could feel the impact.

Reputational Implications

CPC designation presents Nigeria as state with governance lapses, weakening its diplomatic leverage and continental leadership images.

Comparative Perspectives on CPC Designations

Historical comparisons show wide variation in how states respond to CPC designation. Nations like Myanmar and Iran have faced sweeping sanctions due to systematic abuses, while others have negotiated reforms to avoid full penalties. Nigeria's case is unique: it is not accused of state-sponsored persecution but rather failure to curb rights violations by non-state actors. This distinction opens opportunities for constructive diplomacy and reform-based delisting.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Diplomatic Engagement

Nigeria should adopt a proactive approach through:

- i. Structured dialogue with U.S. officials.
 - ii. Transparent, evidence-based reporting on reforms.
 - iii. Multi-stakeholder forums engaging civil society, religious leaders, and security agencies.
- Effective diplomacy can halt escalation and clear a path toward delisting.

Comprehensive Security Sector Reforms

Reforms should address:

- i. Oversight and accountability for security agencies
- ii. Transparent security budgeting
- iii. Human-rights-based training
- iv. Community-level early-warning systems

These measures can reduce abuses and restore legitimacy.

Strengthen Legal and Institutional Protections for Religious Freedom

Nigeria should:

- i. Enforce constitutional protections
- ii. Ensure due process in blasphemy cases
- iii. Empower the National Human Rights Commission
- iv. Expand interfaith dialogue platforms

These address core concerns behind the CPC label.

iv. Education access in conflict zones.

Address Structural Drivers of Conflict

Key issues include:

- i. Land and resource tensions.
- ii. Climate impacts.
- iii. Poverty and unemployment.

Economic and Development Strategy Adjustment

Nigeria should diversify partnerships, boost domestic revenue mobilization, attract FDI, and expand public-private partnerships.

IV. TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Summary of Key Implications of Nigeria’s 2025 CPC Re-Designation

Impact Category	Short-Term Implications	Long-Term Implications
Diplomatic	Increased scrutiny	Reshaped partnerships
Security	Delays in cooperation	New frameworks
Economic	Reduced investor confidence	Reforms needed
Human Rights	Elevated international pressure	Institutionalized reforms
Governance	Public debate	State strengthening

Table 2. Drivers of Religious and Communal Violence in Nigeria

Category	Key Factors	Regions	CPC Relevance
Structural	Land and resource conflicts	Middle Belt	Indirect
Socioeconomic	Poverty, unemployment	North-East/West	Recruitment risk
Institutional	Weak justice system	National	Impunity issues
Religious	Extremist ideology	North-East	Direct relevance

Table 3. Recommended Policy Pathways and Expected Outcomes

Policy Area	Key Actions	Expected Outcomes	Timeframe
Diplomacy	Re-engagement, transparency	Better relations	6–18 months
Security Reform	Oversight, training	Reduced abuses	1–5 years
Legal Framework	Enforce rights, empower NHRC	Trust restoration	2–4 years
Structural Issues	Land reform, climate action	Reduced violence	3–10 years
Economic Adjustments	Diversification, PPPs	Shock resistance	1–3 years

Figure 1. Conceptual Model Linking Security Weaknesses to CPC Risk



Figure 2. Nigeria’s Conflict Drivers (Systems Model)

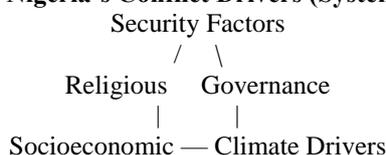


Figure 3. Hypothetical Trend of Nigeria’s IRF Standing (2015–2025)



V. CONCLUSION

The 2025 re-designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern represents a critical turning point in the country's domestic governance and international engagement. While formally grounded in concerns over religious freedom, the designation exposes deeper structural deficiencies encompassing insecurity, weak governance, socio-economic inequality, and fragile institutions. These interconnected challenges have undermined Nigeria's constitutional commitments and eroded international confidence in the state's capacity to protect fundamental rights.

Although the CPC designation carries significant diplomatic, economic, and reputational costs, it should not be viewed solely as punitive. Rather, it presents an opportunity for introspection and reform. Strategic diplomatic engagement, strengthened accountability mechanisms, effective security sector reform, and the enforcement of constitutional protections are essential steps toward rebuilding trust both domestically and internationally. Equally important is the pursuit of inclusive socio-economic policies that address the root causes of conflict and marginalization.

Recent developments—such as the announced partial visa restrictions on Nigerian citizens by the United States and the recall of the U.S. Ambassador—underscore the tangible consequences of continued international concern. These actions signal growing impatience within the international community and highlight the urgency for Nigeria to demonstrate measurable progress. Ultimately, delisting from the CPC category will require sustained political will, institutional reform, and a holistic approach that integrates security, governance, and development. Nigeria's response to this challenge will shape not only its global standing but also the long-term stability and cohesion of the Nigerian state.

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