

Nigerians view religious leaders as more trustworthy, less corrupt than public institutions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 900 | Raphael Mbaegbu

Summary

Faith and religion are central to Nigerian life. In its 2015 survey, Afrobarometer found that more than 70% of Nigerians said they practiced their religion at least several times a week. Christianity (50%) and Islam (48%) are the most widely practiced faiths in the country (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Although the Nigerian Constitution protects citizens' right to freedom of religion or belief, critics say violations by state and non-state actors are common, including the imposition of shari'a law on non-Muslims, abductions and executions of citizens based on their religious affiliation, and discrimination against religious minorities (such as Muslims living in predominantly Christian areas and vice versa (Williams, 2022).

Often citizens rely on religious leaders, rather than secular authorities, to address these issues by serving as peace ambassadors and mediators (Punch, 2023, 2024). Because they lead large congregations in mosques and churches, they can potentially shape the attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of millions of Nigerians.

Given the importance of religion and religious leaders in Nigerian society, this dispatch provides a snapshot of how different groups in society view religious leaders and how tolerant citizens are toward people of different religious backgrounds.

Survey findings reveal that religious leaders are more widely trusted and less widely seen as corrupt than key public institutions. But trust varies significantly by citizens' religion, education level, and location.

While tolerance toward people from other religious backgrounds is high, trust in them is lower. About one in 10 Nigerians say members of their religion are "often" or "always" treated unfairly by the government. But large majorities say that there is more that unites Nigerians than divides them and that communities are made stronger by diversity.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians in March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Nigerians (60%) say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to 27% who say the same about their president and 19% who trust Parliament.
 - Trust levels are highest among citizens with no formal education (82%), Muslims (77%), and rural residents (67%).
- One-fourth (26%) of citizens think that “most” or “all” religious leaders are corrupt.
- Tolerance toward other religions is high: More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) say they would “strongly like,” would “somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they lived next door to people of a different religion.
- But trust across religious groups is significantly lower: Only half (51%) of respondents say they trust members of other faiths “somewhat” or “a lot.”
 - And such trust differs enormously according to religion: Seven in 10 Muslims (70%) say they trust non-Muslims, compared to just 37% of Christians who trust practitioners of other religions.
- About one in 10 Nigerians (11%) say members of their religion are “often” or “always” treated unfairly by the government, in addition to 23% who report that this happens “sometimes.”
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Nigerians say that freedom of religion should be absolute, barring the government from intervening in religious practices. One-third (34%) think the government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship.
- More than six in 10 citizens (62%) believe that in spite of ethnic, religious, cultural, and political differences, there is more that unites Nigerians than there is that divides them.
- Large majorities of both Muslims (77%) and Christians (68%) say that communities are stronger when they are made up of people from different ethnic groups, races, or religions.

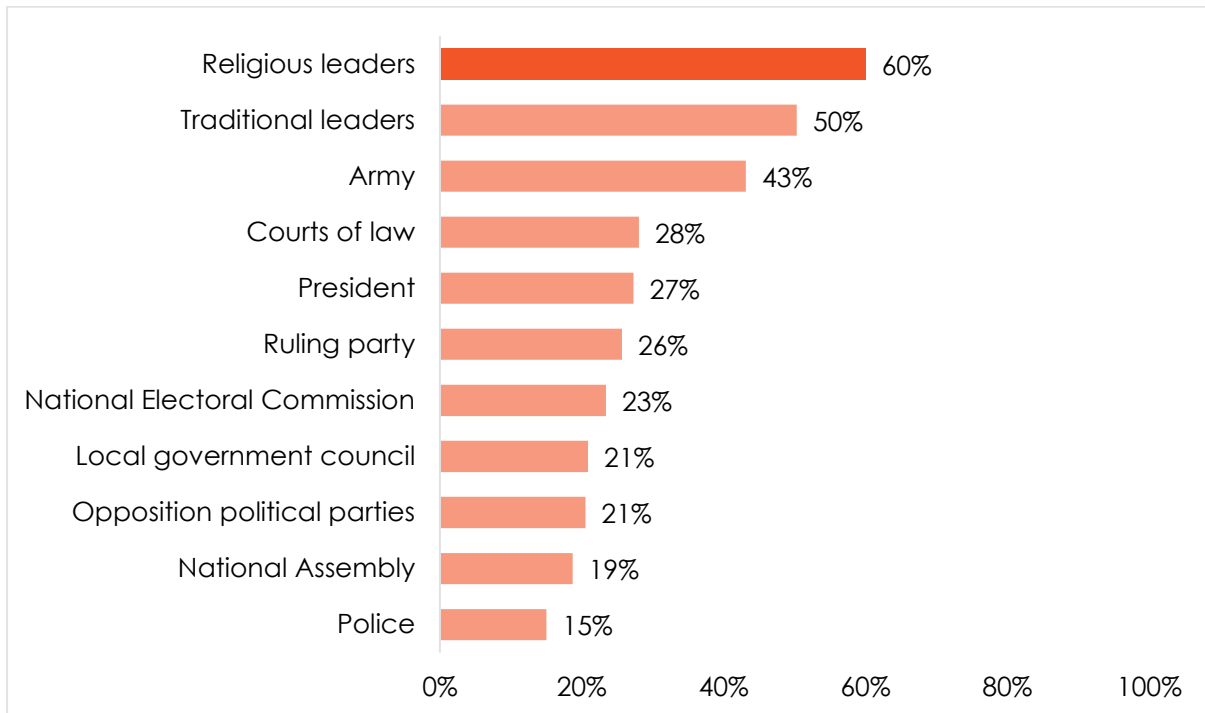
Trust in religious leaders

Trust in public officials and community leaders is important as they are often called upon to make contested decisions or provide guidance to citizens (e.g. in the implementation of new laws or the enforcement of existing ones) (Daily Trust, 2023).

Afrobarometer survey findings allow us to gauge Nigerians' views of religious leaders in comparison to other community leaders and public institutions. The data show that six in 10 citizens (60%) say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot” – more than twice as many as express trust in the president (27%), and three times the trust level enjoyed by the National Assembly (19%) (Figure 1). At 50%, traditional leaders also far outrank most formal government institutions.

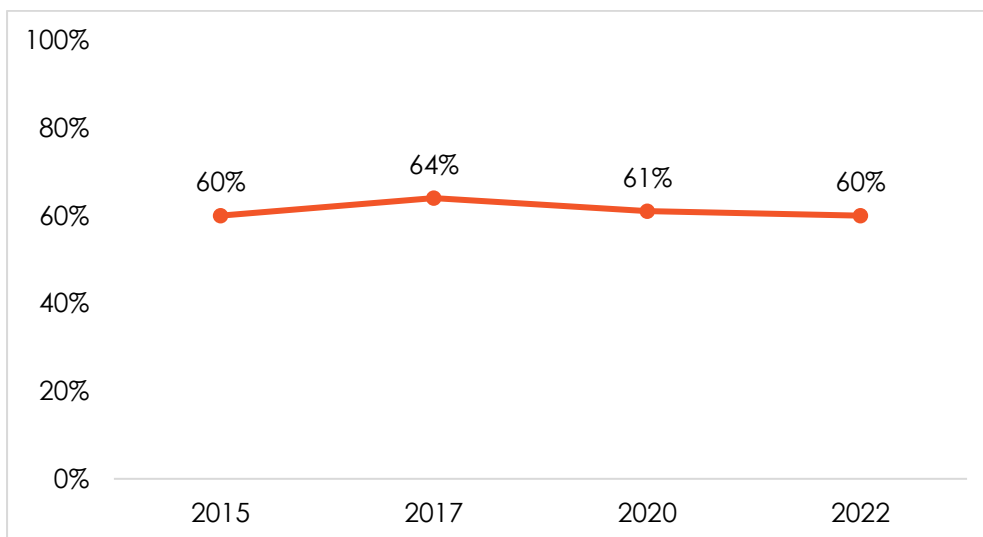
The perceived trustworthiness of religious leaders has remained remarkably stable in recent years (Figure 2), despite increasing political involvement of churches (Abati, 2022).

Figure 1: Popular trust in key public institutions and leaders | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 2: Popular trust in religious leaders | Nigeria | 2015-2022

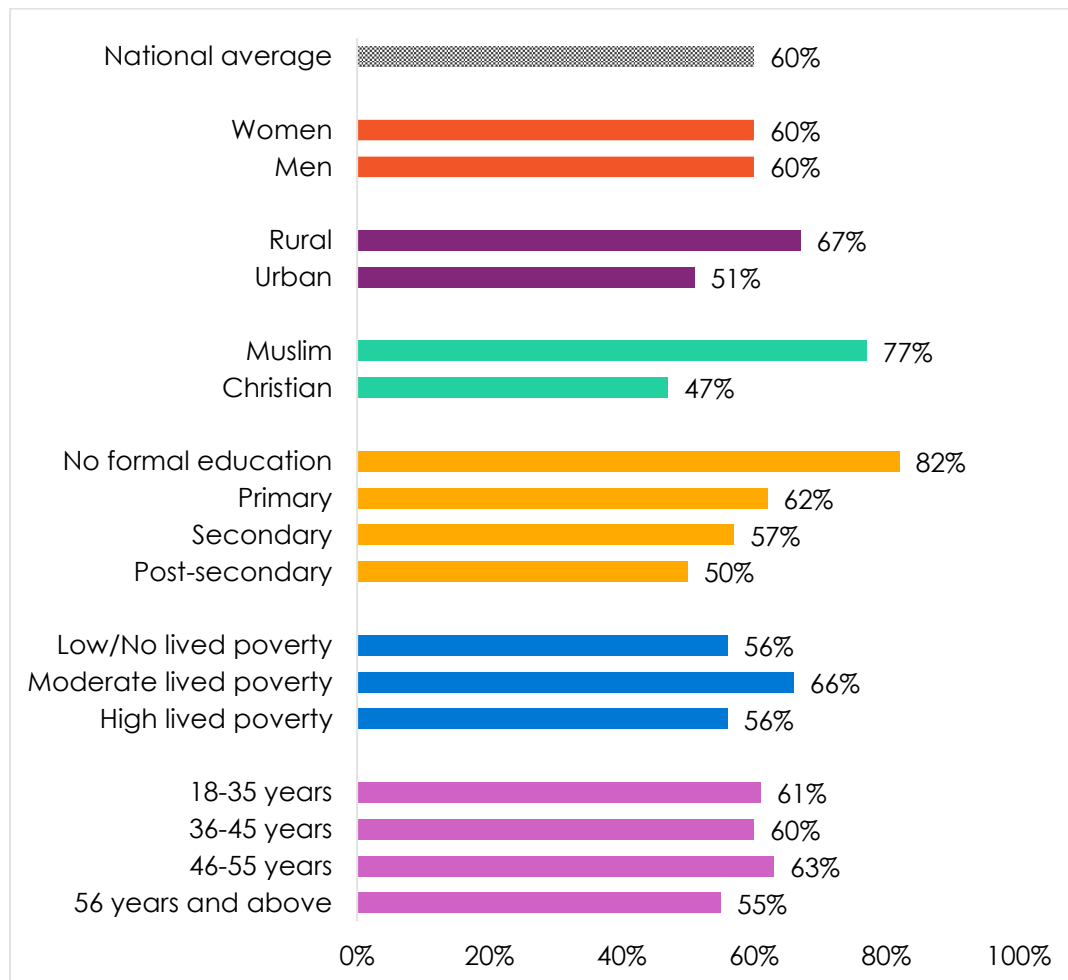


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

However, citizens are not uniform in their trust in religious leaders. Adults with no formal education are far more likely to report trust than those with secondary or post-secondary education (82% vs. 50%-57%) (Figure 3). Rural residents (67%) are also more likely to trust religious leaders than urbanites (51%), whereas men and women are equally likely to be trusting.

It is an interesting question whether faith plays a role in shaping Nigerians' trust in religious leaders. The data show that Muslims (77%) are 30 percentage points more likely to trust religious leaders than Christians (47%). One factor that may contribute to this difference is that in Nigeria many Islamic leaders double as traditional leaders. For example, the supreme leader of Muslims in Nigeria is the Sultan of Sokoto, who also serves as the paramount ruler of northern Nigeria, the region with the largest Muslim population in the country (This Day, 2024). These leaders share many socio-cultural practices and norms with their followers, and in times of crises, they play pivotal roles in conflict resolution and the promotion of social cohesion.

Figure 3: Trust in religious leaders | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

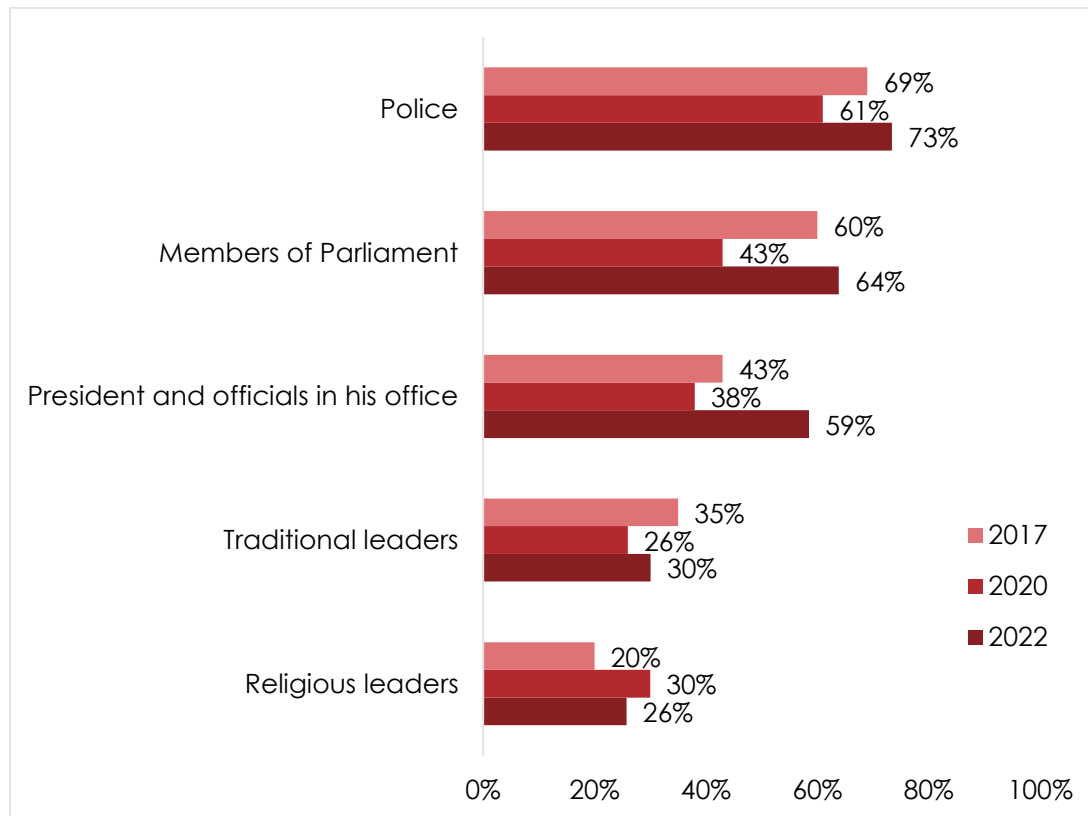
Perceived corruption among religious leaders

Public trust in institutions and leaders depends in part on their perceived integrity, as the perception of widespread corruption tends to erode people's trust (Armah-Attah, Gyimah-Boadi, & Chikwanha, 2007). Despite government anti-corruption efforts through the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and other agencies and laws, official corruption remains a critical issue for Nigeria (Obadare, 2022).

About one in four Nigerians (26%) think that "most" or "all" religious leaders are corrupt, up from 20% in 2017 but a 4-percentage-point improvement compared to 2020 (Figure 4).

Religious leaders are somewhat less widely seen as corrupt than traditional leaders (30%) and fare far better in citizens' assessments than officials in the Presidency (59%), members of Parliament (64%), and the police (73%).

Figure 4: Perceptions of widespread corruption among public leaders | Nigeria
 | 2017-2022



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

People of other religions: Tolerance and trust

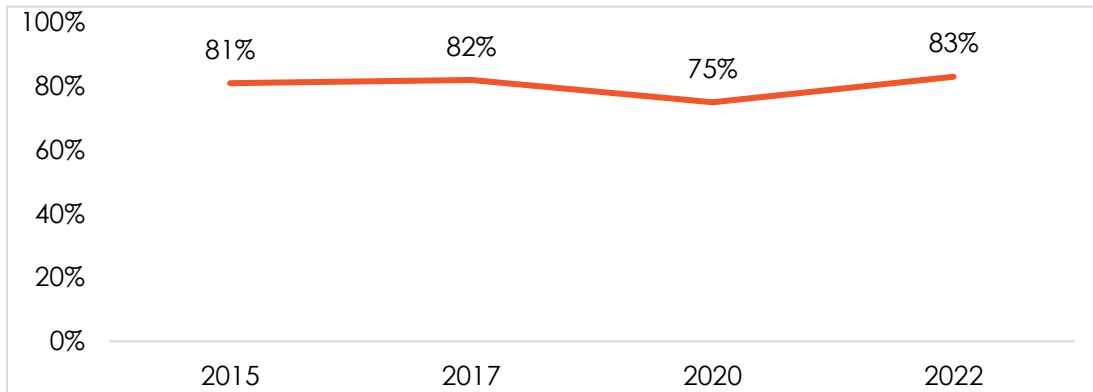
Every 16 November, the United Nations celebrates International Day for Tolerance, an occasion to remind the world of the dangers of intolerance. The Afrobarometer survey assesses a country's religious tolerance by asking respondents whether they would like having people of a different religion as neighbours.

Most Nigerians express tolerant attitudes for people from different religious backgrounds: More than four-fifths (83%) say they would "strongly like," would "somewhat like," or "would not care" if their neighbours worshipped differently than they do themselves (Figure 5). Despite a slight dip in 2020, the share of tolerant citizens has remained at three-quarters of the population or more since 2015.

But trust levels are much lower than tolerance levels: Only half (51%) of citizens say they trust people from different religious backgrounds "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 6). Breaking down this finding by the two major religions shows that Muslims are almost twice as likely as Christians to express trust in people of other religions (70% vs. 37%).

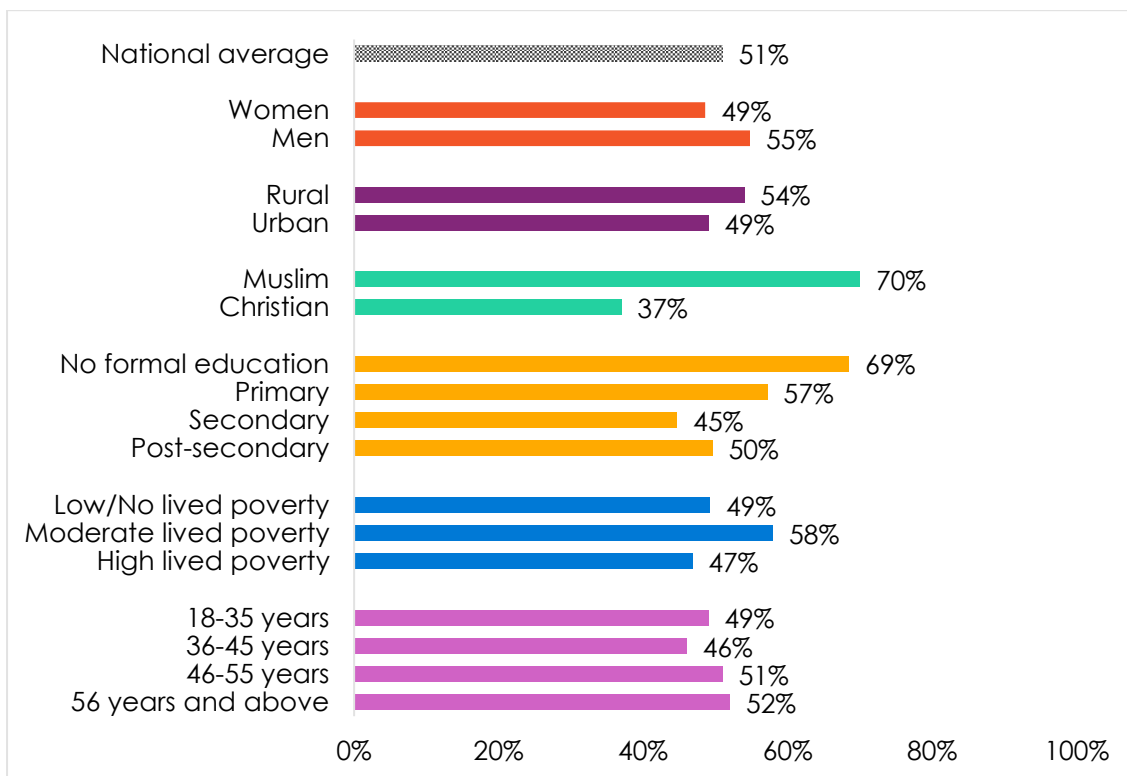
Trust across religious divides is also more prominent among people with no formal education (69%) than their more educated compatriots (45%-57%). Rural residents (54%) and men (55%) are also slightly more trusting than urbanites (49%) and women (49%).

Figure 5: Tolerance of other religions | Nigeria | 2015-2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

Figure 6: Trust in people of other religions | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



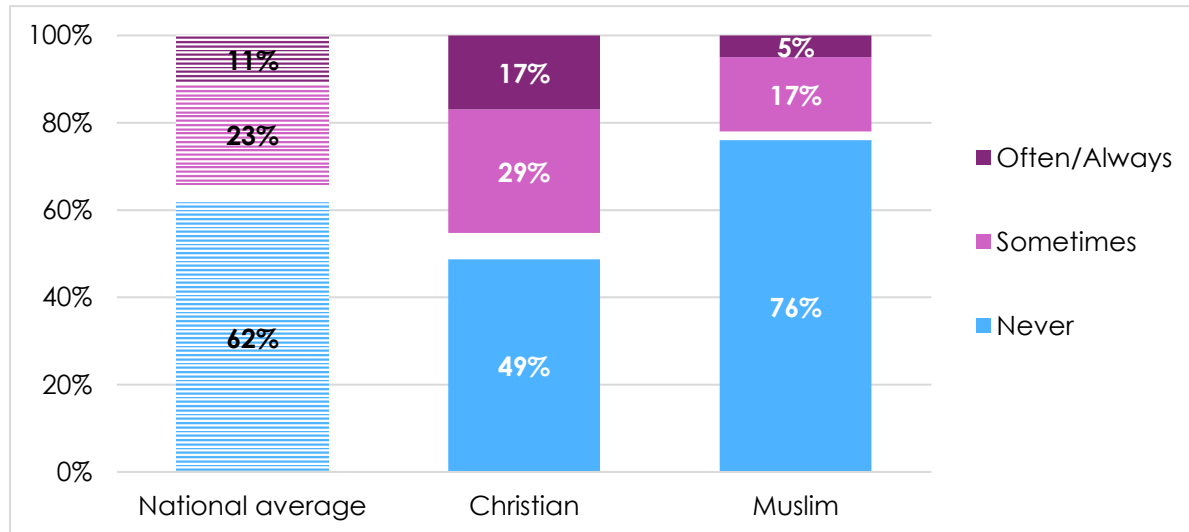
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: People from other religions? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Unfair treatment based on religion

In its 2020 survey in Nigeria, Afrobarometer asked respondents how often, if ever, members of their religious group are treated unfairly by the government. Findings show that about one in 10 Nigerians (11%) say this happens “often” or “always,” in addition to 23% who report that it occurs “sometimes” (Figure 7). A majority (62%) say the government “never” treats members of their faith unfairly.

Christians (17%) are about three times as likely as Muslims (5%) to say that members of their religion “often” or “always” face unfair treatment at the hands of the government.

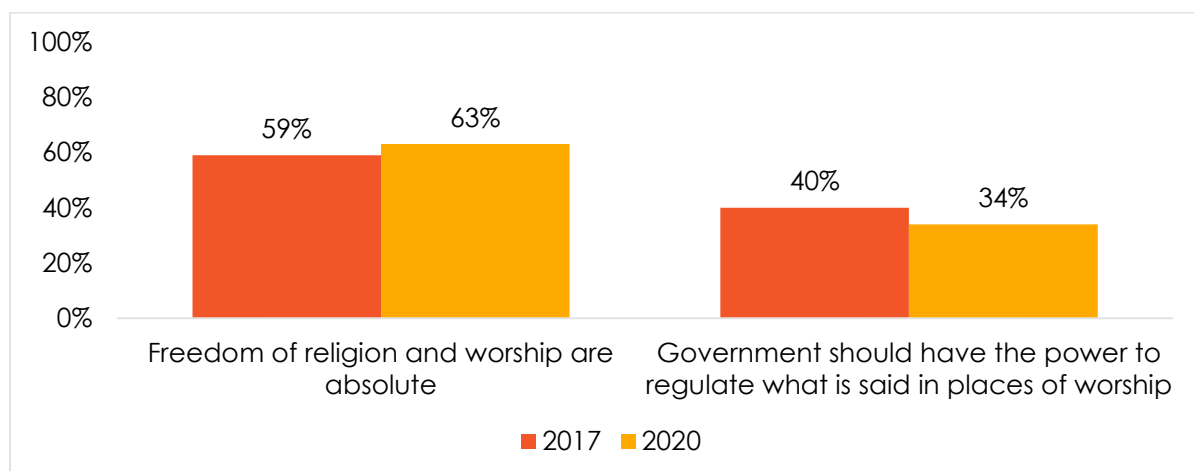
Figure 7: Religious group treated unfairly by the government | Nigeria | 2020



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of respondent's religious group] treated unfairly by the government?

Going beyond respondents' experiences, the data also provide insights into citizens' views on the extent of government regulation at places of worship. Across two survey rounds in 2017 and 2020, about six in 10 respondents say that freedom of religion and worship are absolute and that the government should never limit what is said in a place of worship (Figure 8). Most recently, one-third (34%) of Nigerians “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.

Figure 8: Is religious freedom absolute? | Nigeria | 2017-2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.

Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

United in diversity?

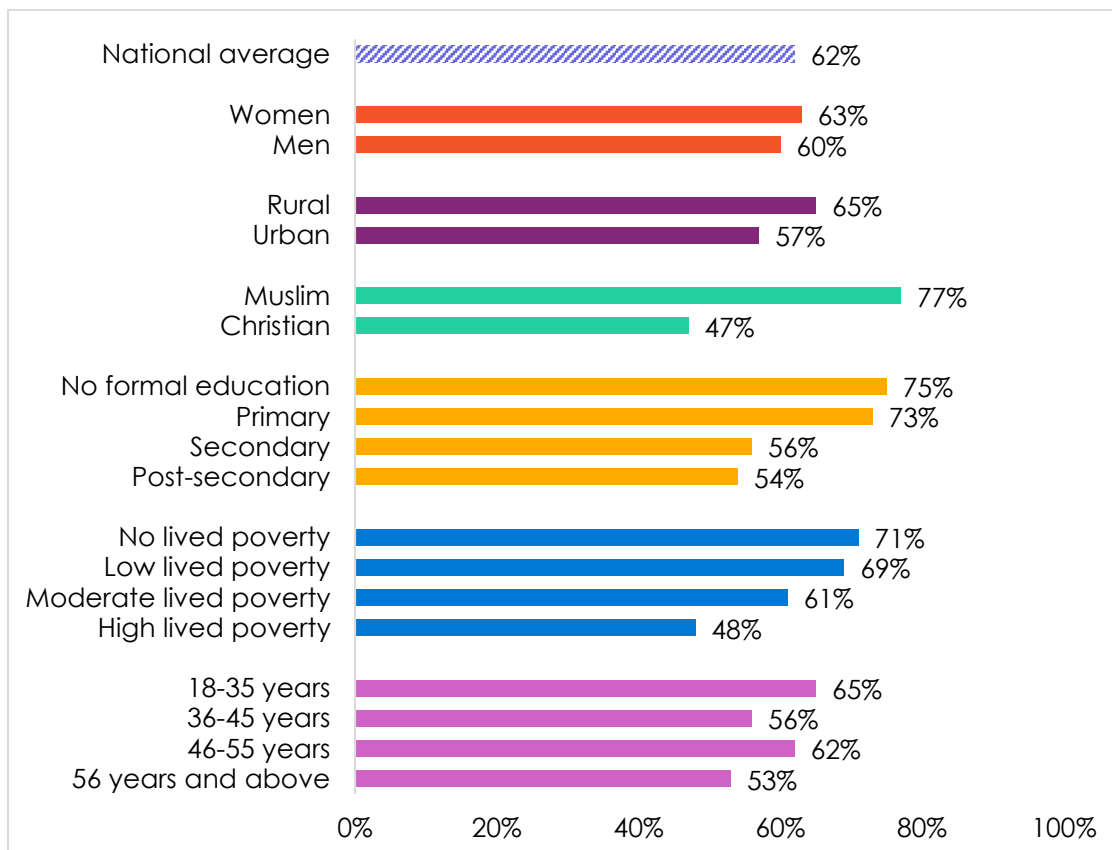
Considering Christians' and Muslims' trust in their leaders, as well as their levels of tolerance vis-à-vis each other, what are the prospects for a diverse country like Nigeria to increase tolerance and respect across different groups?

More than six in 10 Nigerians (62%) believe that in spite of their diversity and differences, there is more that unites people in the country than there is that divides them (Figure 9).

However, education, religion, and material welfare are associated with very different evaluations of this question. Nigerians with primary schooling or less are far more likely than more educated citizens to say that there is more that unites Nigerians (73%-75% vs. 54%-56%). More than three-fourths (77%) of Muslims believe in a united Nigeria, compared to fewer than half (47%) of Christians. Among the poorest citizens,¹ too, fewer than half (48%) believe in a connected country, as against significant majorities of better-off citizens (61%-71%).

In line with majority perceptions of unity over division, Nigerians express strong support for a pluralistic society: Almost three-fourths (73%) consider communities to be stronger when they are made up of people from different ethnic groups, races, or religions (Figure 10).

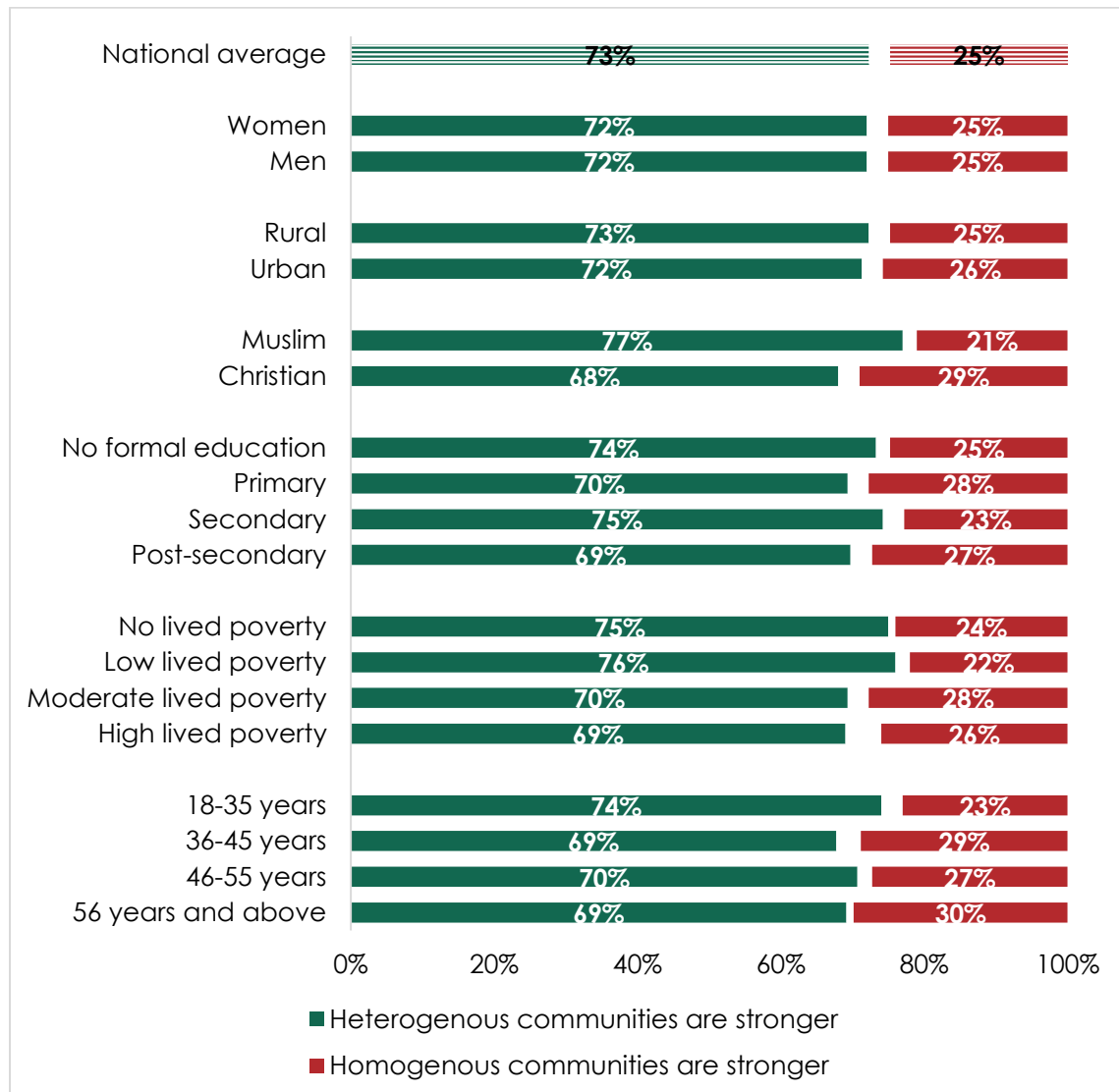
Figure 9: More that unites Nigerians than divides them | Nigeria | 2020



Respondents were asked: Overall, would you say that there is more that unites all Nigerians as one people, or more that divides them? (% who say "somewhat more" or "much more" that unites)

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 10: Are diverse communities stronger? | Nigeria | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people from different ethnic groups, races, or religions.
 Statement 2: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people who are similar to each other, that is, people from the same ethnic group, race, or religion.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey findings show that Nigerians hold religious leaders in high regard, trusting them more and seeing them as less corrupt than elected leaders and government officials.

Adherents of Christianity and Islam, the country's two dominant faiths, display major differences in their attitudes on various issues related to religion. Compared to Muslims, Christians are significantly less trusting of religious leaders and of people of different religious backgrounds, more likely to indicate that members of their religion are treated unfairly by the government, and less likely to think that there is more that unites Nigerians than divides them.

But Nigerians generally value having a diverse society, and tolerant attitudes toward other religions are the norm. A clear majority of citizens favour absolute freedom of religion and worship, though a substantial minority say government regulation of what is said in places of worship is sometimes necessary, especially if religious leaders or congregants threaten public safety. Most citizens say that there is more that unites Nigerians than divides them and that communities are made stronger by diversity.

These findings suggest a solid basis for vigorous engagement by government actors, religious leaders, and other civil society activists to build national cohesion by advancing religious freedom and tolerance.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

- Abati, R. (2022). Politics and the church in Nigeria. Premium Times. 15 March.
- Ahmad, M. (2014). The role of religious leaders in the modern world. Centre for Islam and Public Policy. 27 February.
- Armah-Attoh, D., Gyimah-Boadi, E., & Chikwanha, A. B. (2007). Corruption and institutional trust in Africa: Implications for democratic development. Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 81.
- Daily Trust. (2023). Religious leaders and fostering national security. 13 September.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 84.
- Obadare, E. (2022). Nigeria's all too familiar corruption ranking begs broader questions around normative collapse. Council on Foreign Relations. 24 February.
- Punch. (2023). Peaceful coexistence possible in Nigeria, say CAN, Sultan, others. 23 September.
- Punch. (2024). #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria: Protesters invite religious leaders for talks. 3 August.
- This Day. (2024). Sokoto state government and the Sultan. 11 November.
- U.S. Department of State. (2022). 2022 report on international religious freedom: Nigeria.
- Williams, D. U. (2022). State and non-state violations of religious freedom and implications for national unity in Nigeria. Canopy Forum.

Raphael Mbaegbu is the head of social research and Afrobarometer project manager for NOI Polls. Email: rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a donation to Afrobarometer. To make an online donation, kindly follow this [link](#) or this [link](#). To discuss institutional funding, contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org).

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



/Afrobarometer



@Afrobarometer



@Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 900 | 14 November 2024