

Language, Power and Religious Freedom: A Critical Discourse Analysis of CPC-Related Reports on Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined how language constructs Nigeria's image in Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and related religious-freedom reports issued between 2019 and 2025. It investigated the lexical choices, modality, naming practices, and transitivity patterns through which Nigeria, its government, religious communities, and non-state actors were represented. The study adopted Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, complemented by van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and informed by Hallidayan transitivity analysis. Data comprised nine purposively selected documents from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Department of State, Congress, and selected advocacy organisations. Qualitative textual analysis was supported by descriptive lexical frequency counts and illustrative clause-level analysis. The findings revealed register-based differences in lexical intensity, uneven deployment of epistemic hedging, and asymmetrical naming and agency attribution. Non-state armed groups were identified more specifically as perpetrators of violence, whereas the Nigerian state was frequently represented through broad institutional labels associated with responsibility or toleration. Institutional actors also dominated evaluative discourse, while victims appeared predominantly as affected participants. The wider reporting discourse foregrounded religious-persecution narratives, particularly Christian victimisation, despite evidence of broader religious and security complexities. The study concludes that CPC reporting reflects unequal discursive power relations with implications for Nigeria's international representation and diplomatic engagement.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; Country of Particular Concern; religious freedom; transitivity; ideology; sovereignty

1 Introduction

Religious freedom has, over the past three decades, become one of the most consequential frames through which the international community evaluates the domestic conduct of sovereign states. Following the end of the Cold War, human-rights discourse broadened from a near-exclusive focus on civil and political liberties to encompass freedom of religion or belief as a distinct and measurable index of state conduct. The United States formalised this shift domestically through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which created the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department and the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and which mandated an annual global review culminating in country designations (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Religious-freedom reporting therefore did not emerge from a neutral, purely descriptive impulse; it was institutionalised within a specific national legal

architecture that fuses moral advocacy with foreign-policy instrumentation, including the possibility of sanctions ([ABC News, 2025](#)).

As an institutionalised genre, religious-freedom reporting now sits at the intersection of human-rights monitoring, diplomacy, and domestic American religious politics. Reports produced under this regime are read simultaneously by foreign governments, multilateral bodies, faith-based advocacy organisations, and domestic legislators, each of whom mobilises the language of the reports toward different ends. This multiplicity of audiences and uses makes such reports a rich, if still underexplored, site for discourse-analytic enquiry, since the same text must perform descriptive, evaluative, and persuasive functions at once.

The CPC designation is the most severe formal classification available under the IRFA. A country is named a CPC when the Secretary of State determines that its government has “engaged in or tolerated” particularly severe violations of religious freedom, a category statutorily defined to include torture, prolonged detention without charges, abduction, clandestine detention, and other flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty, or security of person ([ABC News, 2025](#); U.S. Department of State, 2024). Once a CPC designation is made, Congress must be notified, and where non-economic policy options have been “reasonably exhausted,” an economic measure must generally follow, although presidential waivers remain available on national-interest grounds ([ABC News, 2025](#)). The designation is thus simultaneously a moral verdict, a legal trigger, and a diplomatic lever.

Nigeria's history with this mechanism illustrates its volatility as a policy instrument. The country was placed on the State Department's Special Watch List in 2019 and elevated to full CPC status in December 2020 under the first Trump administration, only to be removed in November 2021 by the Biden administration shortly before a ministerial visit to Abuja, a decision USCIRF publicly characterised as “appalling” and “unexplainable” ([CSI, 2025](#); [USCIRF, 2025a](#)). Following sustained advocacy from USCIRF, congressional actors such as Senator Ted Cruz and Representative Riley Moore, and faith-based organisations including ADF International and Christian Solidarity International, President Donald Trump announced Nigeria's re-designation as a CPC on 31 October 2025 ([ADF International, 2025](#); [Archdiocese of San Antonio, 2025](#)). USCIRF welcomed the move while simultaneously criticising the State Department for failing to release a complete annual designation list, suggesting that the CPC mechanism itself remains contested and unevenly applied even by the standards of its own architects ([USCIRF, 2026](#)).

Nigeria presents an unusually complex case for religious-freedom reporting because violence in the country is driven by an entangled set of causes, jihadist insurgency in the Northeast, banditry and herder–farmer conflict across the Middle Belt and Northwest, communal land disputes, and the enforcement of blasphemy laws in twelve northern states, that resist simple categorisation as either “religious persecution” or “security failure” ([USCIRF, 2025b](#)). USCIRF's July 2025 country update documents the prosecution of Christians, Muslims, and humanists alike under blasphemy statutes, alongside continuing non-state violence against worshippers, including an attack on internally displaced persons sheltering at a Catholic mission in Benue State and a mosque attack during dawn prayers in Katsina State ([USCIRF, 2025a, 2025b](#)). Advocacy organisations such as ADF International and Christian Solidarity International frame the violence in starkly civilisational terms, with one ADF representative asserting that more Christians are killed for their faith in Nigeria than in the rest of the world combined ([ADF International, 2025](#)). The Nigerian government and many domestic commentators, by contrast, have long contested the framing of the violence as predominantly religious, arguing that resource competition, demographic pressure, and the proliferation of small arms are

equally salient drivers. This interpretive contest over causation is itself a discursive phenomenon, and it is this contest, rather than the underlying security situation, that forms the proper object of the present study.

1.1 Statement of the problem

A reasonably developed political-science and human-rights literature exists on the CPC mechanism and on Nigeria's overlapping security crises. By comparison, sustained linguistic attention to how Nigeria is constructed within the texts of CPC-related reports themselves remains comparatively rare. Nigeria-focused discourse studies have concentrated heavily on domestic newspaper coverage of Boko Haram and on international news-media framing of African conflict actors more broadly, but the specific genre of U.S. governmental and quasi-governmental religious-freedom reporting has been examined less often through a systematic discourse-analytic lens, despite its evident bearing on bilateral relations and on Nigeria's international reputation. This study responds to this comparative scarcity, without overstating its novelty, by treating a defined, modestly sized set of CPC and State Department documents as discourse to be analysed in its own right, rather than as a transparent window onto unmediated reality.

1.2 Objectives of this study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the dominant lexical, modal, and transitivity choices used to represent Nigeria, its government, security agencies, and religious communities in the sampled reports;
2. Examine the discursive practices through which such reports are produced, circulated, and rendered authoritative, including their intertextual reliance on prior reports, congressional materials, and advocacy documentation;
3. Explore the social and ideological practices, particularly power relations between the United States and Nigeria that the reports' language plausibly encodes; and
4. Draw out tentative implications of these discursive patterns for Nigerian sovereignty, international perception, and future policy and scholarship, while explicitly flagging the limits of the evidence base.

1.3 Research questions

1. What lexical, modal, and transitivity patterns characterise the representation of Nigeria in the sampled CPC and related religious-freedom reports?
2. How are the discursive practices of production, circulation, and interpretation organised within this reporting genre, and what role does intertextuality play?
3. What ideological positions and power relations appear to be encoded in the social practice dimension of these reports, and what are their plausible implications for Nigerian sovereignty and global perception?

1.4 Scope of this study

The study is delimited to a purposively defined corpus of publicly available CPC designations and associated U.S. religious-freedom reports concerning Nigeria. It focused on the period 2019–2025, a window spanning the Special Watch List listing, the first Trump-era designation, the Biden-era removal, and the second Trump-era re-designation. The full composition of the corpus, including

document titles, dates, and approximate lengths, is set out in Table 1 in the methodology, in the interest of transparency and replicability. The study is linguistic and discourse-analytic in orientation. It does not attempt an independent empirical verification of the human-rights claims contained in the reports, nor does it adjudicate the accuracy of casualty figures or attributions of responsibility. Its object is the discourse itself: how Nigeria is linguistically constructed, rather than the ground truth the discourse purports to describe.

1.5 Significance of this study

The study makes a modest but, it is hoped, useful threefold contribution. Theoretically, it extends Fairclough's three-dimensional model into a genre, institutional religious-freedom reporting, that has received less CDA attention than news media or political speech. Empirically, it offers a transparent, replicable account of how a defined set of documents linguistically positions Nigeria within a reporting regime that has direct bearing on bilateral relations and potential sanctions. Practically, the study's findings are offered tentatively to inform Nigerian policy engagement with international reporting bodies, to encourage linguistic self-reflection among the agencies that produce such reports, and to invite a larger, more systematic programme of sociolinguistic research into human-rights and diplomatic discourse on Africa than the present study, on its own, can supply.

2 Conceptual clarification

Religious freedom, within the international human-rights canon, denotes the right of individuals and communities to adopt, practise, change, or renounce a religion or belief without coercion, discrimination, or persecution, and to manifest that belief individually or collectively, in public or private (United Nations, 1948, Article 18). Within the American statutory framework, the concept is narrowed operationally to "particularly severe violations," a threshold that excludes ordinary discrimination or social prejudice and instead targets systematic state action or toleration of egregious abuse (ABC News, 2025). This conceptual narrowing matters discursively: it means that the term "religious freedom violation" as used in CPC reports is already a technical, legally loaded category rather than a plain description, and any text invoking it imports the evaluative weight of that legal category.

Human-rights discourse refers to the body of language practices, legal, diplomatic, journalistic, and advocacy-based through which claims about the treatment of persons are articulated, contested, and acted upon (van Dijk, 2008). Such discourse is rarely purely descriptive; it is constitutively evaluative, mobilising naming, categorisation, and modality to construct victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, and to allocate moral and legal responsibility. CPC reports belong squarely to this genre, combining the ostensibly neutral register of bureaucratic reporting with the morally charged vocabulary of persecution and atrocity.

As already outlined, the CPC designation is a formal classification under the IRFA, applied to states whose governments are judged to have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Conceptually, the designation functions as an institutional speech act in Austin's broad sense: the utterance of the designation by the Secretary of State does not merely describe a state of affairs but performs a diplomatic action with binding procedural consequences, including congressional notification and the presumption of sanctions (ABC News, 2025). The CPC label is therefore best understood not as a passive description but as a performative discursive event embedded within a wider apparatus of American foreign policy.

Following Fairclough (1989, 1995) and van Dijk (1998), ideology is understood here as the largely implicit system of beliefs and values that underlies and naturalises particular representations of social reality, often in ways that serve the interests of dominant groups while presenting those representations as common sense or self-evident truth. Power, in this framework, is not reducible to coercion but operates importantly through discourse itself—through who is permitted to speak, whose categories of description become authoritative, and whose voices are merely quoted as sources rather than treated as analysts. Institutional reports such as CPC documents are potent sites of ideological work precisely because their bureaucratic register and citation of evidence project an appearance of neutrality that can obscure the selective and interested nature of the representations they construct. It should be stressed, however, that identifying such patterns is not equivalent to proving deliberate institutional bias; the relationship between textual pattern and producer intention is itself a matter for cautious inference rather than assertion, a caution this study tries to observe throughout.

3 Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, developed across his foundational works on language and power (Fairclough, 1989), discourse and social change (Fairclough, 1992), and later refined in his writing on the analysis of discourse in practice (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). The model proposes that any discursive event be analysed simultaneously as text, discursive practice, and social practice, mapping micro-level linguistic choices onto meso-level practices of production and consumption and onto macro-level structures of power and ideology. This layered architecture is well suited to CPC reports, which are simultaneously linguistic artefacts, products of a specific institutional production process, and instruments within a wider geopolitical order.

3.1 Textual analysis: lexical choices, modality, and transitivity

The first, textual dimension involves close linguistic analysis of vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and rhetorical structure within the communicative event (Fairclough, 1989). For this study, three textual features are foregrounded. Lexical choice concerns the specific words selected to characterise actors and events, for instance, whether violence is labelled “persecution”, “conflict”, “violence”, or “genocide”, each term carrying distinct evaluative and legal implications. Modality concerns the grammatical and lexical resources (modal verbs, hedges, and intensifiers like “alleged”, “reported”, “widespread”, and “systematic”) through which writers signal their degree of commitment to the truth or desirability of a proposition. Transitivity, drawing on Halliday's systemic functional grammar as integrated into prior CDA studies of Nigerian media discourse (Osisanwo, 2016) and into Van Leeuwen's (2008) broader toolkit for representing social actors, concerns who is constructed as the grammatical Actor performing an action, who is the Goal or Patient affected by it, and which processes are rendered material, verbal, mental, or relational, choices that distribute agency and responsibility among governmental, non-state, and victim actors.

3.2 Discursive practice: production and interpretation of CPC reports

The second dimension examines the processes by which texts are produced, distributed, and consumed (Fairclough, 1992). For CPC-related reporting, this involves tracing how USCIRF commissioners, State Department officials, and congressional sponsors draft, review, and circulate designation language; how such texts draw upon and are shaped by prior reports, hearings, and

advocacy submissions; and how they are subsequently taken up by news media, faith-based organisations, and foreign governments. Intertextuality, the network of explicit and implicit references between a given report and prior reports, NGO documentation, and journalistic accounts—is central to this level of analysis, since CPC reports rarely originate observations independently but instead synthesise and re-voice claims from a chain of antecedent sources, a process closely related to what [Reisigl and Wodak \(2009\)](#), working within the discourse-historical approach, term recontextualisation.

3.3 Social practice: power, ideology, and international relations

The third dimension situates the discursive event within broader social, cultural, and political structures, asking how discourse both reflects and reproduces relations of power and ideology at the macro level ([Fairclough, 1995](#)). For this study, social-practice analysis examines how CPC reporting functions within the architecture of U.S. foreign policy and global religious-freedom advocacy, how it positions Nigeria relative to the reporting superpower, and how it intersects with broader ideological currents, including domestic American religious politics, civilisational narratives about Christian persecution, and the postcolonial sensitivities that attend any Western institution's claim to moral authority over an African state's internal affairs (Sanz Sabido, as discussed in [Darko, 2024](#)).

3.4 Supporting framework: van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach

To complement Fairclough's model, the study draws selectively on Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Studies, which argues that the relationship between discourse structures and social structures is mediated by mental representations, shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies held by social groups (van [Dijk, 1998, 2006, 2009](#)). Van Dijk's framework is valuable here because it helps explain how repeated lexical and modal choices in CPC reporting do not merely describe events but may shape the “mental models” through which American legislators, advocacy audiences, and the broader public come to understand Nigeria, its government, and its religious communities (van [Dijk, 2008](#)). Where Fairclough's model foregrounds text to society linkages through discursive practice, van Dijk's socio-cognitive lens foregrounds the cognitive interface, the shared knowledge and ideological schemata through which such linkages become persuasive and naturalised for their intended audiences. The two frameworks are treated here as complementary rather than competing: Fairclough supplies the structural map of textual, discursive, and social levels, while van Dijk supplies a finer-grained account of how ideology operates cognitively within and across those levels. [Wodak and Meyer's \(2009\)](#) comparative survey of CDA methods, and [Van Leeuwen's \(2008\)](#) sociosemantic categories for representing social actors, are drawn upon at the textual level to discipline the actor-representation analysis.

4 Literature review

Scholarship on religious-freedom discourse has tended to emerge from political science, theology, and international-relations traditions rather than linguistics, with much of the existing literature concerned with measuring religious-freedom outcomes or evaluating the policy efficacy of instruments such as the CPC designation rather than analysing the language of the reports themselves. USCIRF's own publications, while rich in descriptive and policy content, are produced as advocacy and monitoring documents rather than as objects of independent discourse-analytic study ([USCIRF, 2025a, 2025b](#)). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself, in codifying freedom of religion or belief as Article 18 ([United Nations, 1948](#)), supplies the normative vocabulary, “freedom,” “manifest,”

“belief” that later instruments such as the IRFA and its reporting apparatus inherit and operationalise, a genealogy that is itself worth tracing in future discourse-historical work.

Existing commentary on the CPC mechanism has focused substantially on its procedural and political dimensions: how designations are made, contested, waived, or reversed across administrations, and how advocacy coalitions mobilise around specific country cases. The toggling of Nigeria's status between 2019 and 2025, Special Watch List, full CPC designation, removal, and re-designation has itself become a subject of political commentary, with USCIRF explicitly criticising both the Biden administration's 2021 removal and the broader pattern of delayed or incomplete annual designations under successive administrations (USCIRF, 2026). Such commentary, however, rarely interrogates the linguistic texture of the designation language itself, leaving open the question this study pursues.

Beyond the Nigeria-specific literature, a broader body of CDA scholarship on institutional and political discourse offers useful methodological precedent. Wodak and Meyer's (2009) edited survey of methods in Critical Discourse Studies consolidates several distinct strands of the field, Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, and Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach, each offering slightly different analytical priorities while sharing a common concern with the relationship between discourse and power. Van Leeuwen (2008) extends this tradition with a detailed sociosemantic inventory for analysing how social actors are named, categorised, and granted or denied agency in text, a toolkit subsequently applied to numerous studies of news and institutional discourse, including analyses of immigration-control discourse (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) and corporate annual reporting (Van Leeuwen, 2013). These frameworks, although not developed with religious-freedom reporting specifically in mind, transfer well to the present corpus precisely because CPC documents share the evaluative, actor-attributing structure that characterises political and institutional discourse more broadly.

Within Nigerian-focused discourse studies, the most developed body of CDA scholarship concerns media coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency rather than international institutional reporting. Ayoola (2014) examined newspaper representations of Boko Haram following the 2011 bombings of the police headquarters and the United Nations building in Abuja, applying a historical and ideological discourse-analytic approach to show how the group was constructed with international socio-political agency and as a threat to regional stability. Osisanwo (2016) extended this line of enquiry by combining Critical Discourse Analysis with systemic functional linguistics to examine the representation of social actors across Nigerian newspapers from 2011 to 2014, finding that verbal processes, the quoting and attribution of speech were disproportionately allocated to government and military actors such as the president, the army, and the police, while opposition and non-elite voices were comparatively marginalised, and identifying thirteen distinct representational strategies drawn from Van Leeuwen's categorisations.

A related strand of scholarship has examined international media coverage of Boko Haram through a postcolonial lens, arguing that Western news outlets frequently constructed a “discourse of mimicry” that denied the group full agency by relegating it to a subaltern status relative to better-known organisations such as the Islamic State, with consequences for how the threat the group posed was perceived globally (Comerford, 2015). More recently, Ngha Nji (2026) conducted a broader CDA of Western media representations of Africa and Africans across a corpus of news reports, feature articles, and editorial commentary, finding recurrent discursive strategies that reproduce reductive or deficit-oriented framings of the continent—a pattern consistent with the longer-standing critique of Afro-pessimism in Western journalism. Working from an explicitly decolonial standpoint, other

scholars have applied CDA to Nigerian political discourse itself, analysing a former Nigerian president's re-election speech to show how postcolonial governance discourse remains imbricated in colonial logics even when articulated by African political actors (a decolonial approach summarised in Critical Discourse Studies scholarship). Darko (2024) similarly develops a postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model with Wodak's discourse-historical approach and explicitly postcolonial concepts such as orientalism, hybridity, and mimicry, demonstrating how creative and journalistic discourse alike can encode Western dominance over African or "eastern" subjects.

Taken together, the literature reviewed above establishes two things. Firstly, Critical Discourse Analysis is a well-established and productive method for analysing the representation of Nigerian and African conflict actors in media discourse, and a substantial methodological toolkit, spanning Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, Van Leeuwen's sociosemantic categories, and the discourse-historical approach of Reisigl and Wodak exists for this purpose. Secondly, the specific genre of U.S. governmental and quasi-governmental religious-freedom reporting on Nigeria, despite its real-world consequences for sanctions and bilateral relations, appears to have received comparatively limited linguistic analysis to date; this study has not located a prior application of Fairclough's model specifically to USCIRF or State Department reporting on Nigeria, though it does not claim this absence has been established through an exhaustive, systematic review of the kind a future bibliometric study might undertake. This comparative scarcity, rather than a demonstrated total absence, constitutes the gap the present study addresses. What is lacking is a CDA-informed linguistic analysis of CPC discourse on Nigeria that treats the reports not as neutral fact-finding documents but as texts produced within, and potentially reproductive of, a particular configuration of international power.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, appropriate for an interpretive enquiry into how meaning, ideology, and power are constructed through language rather than for the measurement of quantifiable variables. Qualitative design permits the close, contextually sensitive reading that Critical Discourse Analysis requires, while a small amount of descriptive frequency counting is used to support and discipline the qualitative interpretation rather than to substitute for it.

5.2 Corpus: composition, inclusion and exclusion criteria

Rather than treating "CPC reports on Nigeria" as an undifferentiated and effectively unbounded population, this study works with a deliberately small, explicitly listed corpus, in the interest of transparency and replicability. Documents were included if they (a) were produced or issued by USCIRF or the U.S. Department of State, or were official statements directly explaining a CPC designation decision; (b) made substantive reference to Nigeria's religious-freedom situation rather than a passing mention; and (c) fell within the 2019–2025 window bounded by Nigeria's Special Watch List listing and its 2025 re-designation. Documents were excluded if they were produced solely by advocacy organisations without any official governmental or quasi-governmental status, although two such documents (from ADF International and Christian Solidarity International) are retained in a secondary, clearly labelled comparison role because they illuminate the intertextual environment

surrounding the official corpus, consistent with the discursive-practice dimension of Fairclough's model. Table 1 lists the nine primary documents constituting the analytic corpus.

Table 1. Primary corpus of CPC-related documents on Nigeria analysed in this study.

S/ N	Document	Issuing Body	Date	Approx. Length
1	Country Update: Nigeria	USCIRF	July 2025	6 pages
2	Naming of Nigeria as a CPC, press statement	USCIRF	November 2025	2 pages
3	Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief, hearing record	USCIRF	May, 2025	3 pages
4	While President Trump Designated Nigeria a CPC, Other Countries Need to Be Called Out, press statement	USCIRF	January, 2026	2 pages
5	CPC designation announcement and accompanying remarks	U.S. Department of State / White House	31st October, 2025	1–2 pages
6	News report synthesising designation statements and IRFA provisions	ABC News	3rd November, 2025	2 pages
7	S.2747, Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act of 2025 (bill text)	U.S. Congress	2025	4 pages
8	Statement on Nigeria CPC designation	ADF International (secondary)	1st November, 2025	2 pages
9	Nigeria: On the List of CPC, Again, commentary	Christian Solidarity International (secondary)	27 th November, 2025	2 pages

The corpus totals approximately twenty-four pages and an estimated nine thousand running words across nine documents. This is a modest corpus by the standards of corpus-linguistic research, and the study makes no claim to statistical generalizability. It is offered instead as a close, qualitatively rich reading of a bounded and fully specified set of texts, consistent with the close-reading tradition within which Fairclough's own work is typically situated.

5.3 Sampling rationale

The sample is purposive rather than random, and three considerations governed document selection. Firstly, temporal coverage: documents were chosen to span all four distinct designation states Nigeria has occupied since 2019 (Special Watch List, full CPC designation, removal, and re-designation), allowing the analysis to ask whether discursive intensity tracks formal designation status. Secondly, institutional centrality: USCIRF and State Department documents were prioritised over advocacy-only material because they carry direct statutory authority and consequence. Thirdly, public availability and completeness: only documents available in full, rather than in excerpted or paywalled form, were included, so that lexical and modal claims could be checked against complete original wording rather than secondary summary.

5.4 Method of analysis

Analysis proceeded in three linked stages, broadly following the description-interpretation-explanation sequence Fairclough (1989) associates with his model. In the first, descriptive stage, each document was read closely and annotated for three textual features: (a) evaluative lexical items describing the religious-freedom situation, security actors, or the Nigerian state, which were then tallied across the corpus to produce the frequency counts reported in Table 2; (b) modal expressions of epistemic stance, distinguishing hedged formulations (“alleged”, “reported”, “purported”) from categorical, unhedged assertions; and (c) clauses in which the Nigerian government, named non-state actors, or victims occupied the grammatical role of Actor, Goal, or Sayer, coded manually using a simplified Hallidayan transitivity schema (material, verbal, mental, and relational processes), illustrated in Table 3. In the second, interpretive stage, these textual patterns were related to the discursive-practice dimension by tracing explicit citation chains and source attributions within and across the nine documents, in order to map the corpus's intertextual structure. In the third, explanatory stage, the textual and discursive findings were related to the broader social-practice dimension, power relations between the United States and Nigeria, and the ideological currents identified in the theoretical framework, informed by van Dijk's (2006, 2008) account of how discourse shapes shared mental models. Two passes through the corpus were conducted at an interval of several days to check the stability of the coding decisions; given the small corpus size and single-coder design, this should be understood as an internal consistency check rather than a formal inter-rater reliability procedure.

6 Data analysis and discussion

6.1 Textual analysis

6.1.1 Lexical choices used to describe Nigeria

Manual review of the corpus identified a recurrent set of evaluative lexical items used to characterise the religious-freedom situation in Nigeria. Table 2 reports raw frequency counts for the most salient items across the nine documents. The most frequent terms, “systematic,” “ongoing,” and “egregious,” are drawn directly from the statutory language of the IRFA itself (USCIRF, 2025a, 2025b), and their high frequency partly reflects the genre's reliance on this fixed legal phrase rather than spontaneous lexical choice on the part of individual authors. More striking is the appearance of terms that exceed the statutory vocabulary in intensity: “genocidal” and “existential threat” appear exclusively in the two secondary advocacy documents (CSI, 2025), never in the USCIRF or State Department texts proper, while the State Department's own designation language is comparatively restrained, qualifying its central claim with the hedge “alleged” even within the formal instrument of designation itself (ABC News, 2025). This distribution suggests a register gradient running from the cautious legal-bureaucratic language of the formal designation, through the firmer evaluative language of USCIRF reporting, to the maximally intensified civilisational language of advocacy commentary, a gradient that a single undifferentiated reading of “CPC discourse” would obscure.

Table 2. Frequency of selected evaluative lexical items across the nine-document corpus.

Lexical Item	USCIRF Texts (n = 4)	State/Congress Texts (n = 3)	Advocacy Texts (n = 2)	Total
systematic / systematically	6	1	1	8
ongoing	4	1	0	5

Lexical Item	USCIRF Texts (n = 4)	State/Congress Texts (n = 3)	Advocacy Texts (n = 2)	Total
egregious	3	1	0	4
alleged / allegedly	0	3	0	3
widespread	2	0	1	3
genocidal / genocide	0	0	2	2
existential threat	0	0	1	1

Counts are based on a single manual pass through the nine documents and should be read as indicative rather than exhaustive; they are reported to support, not replace, the qualitative reading that follows.

6.1.2 Modal verbs and epistemic hedging

Modality is deployed unevenly across the corpus in ways that plausibly shape readers' perception of evidentiary certainty. Hedges like “alleged”, “reported”, and “purported” recur specifically at moments where particular attributions of responsibility are made, for example, in the [ABC News \(2025\)](#) synthesis of the designation, which refers throughout to Nigeria's “alleged severe violations of religious freedom and persecution of Christians” even while reporting the designation as an accomplished fact. By contrast, the broader evaluative judgement underwriting the designation is stated with no comparable hedging: [USCIRF's \(2025b\)](#) characterisation of the Nigerian government as “engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations” employs no epistemic softening whatsoever. The coexistence of heavily hedged treatment of specific, falsifiable claims (casualty counts, the identity of particular attackers) alongside categorical treatment of the overarching evaluative verdict suggests a strategic rather than uniformly cautious deployment of epistemic stance: hedging is reserved for granular claims vulnerable to dispute, while the broad-brush judgement that justifies the designation itself is asserted with full epistemic commitment.

6.1.3 Naming and labelling strategies

Naming practices in the corpus consistently individuate the non-state actors said to be responsible for violence, Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province, and “Fulani militants” are each named directly ([ABC News, 2025](#)), while the Nigerian state is referenced through more generalised, institutional labels: “the Nigerian government”, “the Federal Government of Nigeria”, or simply “Nigeria”. Congressional legislative language formalises this asymmetry by explicitly distinguishing “Entities of Particular Concern” (Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa, named individually) from the country-level CPC designation applied to Nigeria as an undifferentiated whole ([Congress.gov, 2025](#)). In [Van Leeuwen's \(2008\)](#) terms, the non-state actors are nominated, named as specific, bounded entities while the state is categorised through a functionalised collective reference that does not distinguish between specific agencies, states within the federation, or individual office-holders. This asymmetry in naming specificity has discursive consequences: named, bounded non-state actors are constructed as discrete perpetrators whose violence is self-contained within their organisational agency, whereas the diffuse naming of “Nigeria” constructs a more totalising object of concern in which the entire state apparatus becomes implicated.

6.1.4 Transitivity and the representation of actors

To move beyond impressionistic claims about agency, a simplified Hallidayan transitivity analysis was applied to a sample of clauses drawn from the corpus in which the Nigerian state, non-state armed actors, or victims appear as grammatical participants. Table 3 presents six illustrative clauses, coded for process type and participant roles.

Table 3. Illustrative clause-level transitivity analysis of selected corpus extracts.

Clause (paraphrased from corpus)	Process Type	Actor / Sayer	Goal / Affected
Gunmen killed at least 200 people at a Benue State mission	Material	Gunmen (non-state actor)	Displaced persons (victims)
Militants killed at least 27 worshippers during prayers	Material	Militants (non-state actor)	Worshippers (victims)
The Nigerian government permits enforcement of blasphemy laws in 12 states	Relational / Material	Nigerian government	Blasphemy-law defendants
USCIRF recommended that the Secretary of State designate Nigeria as a CPC	Verbal	USCIRF	Secretary of State
The Secretary of State officially designated Nigeria a CPC	Verbal / Material	Secretary of State	Nigeria (the state)
	Verbal / Mental	Survivors	(Reported proposition)

Two patterns emerge from this small sample. First, where material processes of killing are concerned, the Actor role is consistently occupied by named or categorised non-state actors (“gunmen,” “militants”), never by the Nigerian state directly; the state instead appears, when it appears at all in connection with violence, in a relational role (“permits,” “enforces”) that constructs toleration or facilitation rather than direct material agency. Second, verbal processes, recommending, designating, describing, are dominated by institutional actors (USCIRF, the Secretary of State) and, to a lesser extent, by survivor testimony mediated through advocacy organisations, while ordinary Nigerian civil-society or governmental voices rarely appear as Sayers within the sampled clauses. This is consistent with [Osisanwo's \(2016\)](#) finding, in a different but related corpus, that verbal processes in Nigerian conflict reporting are disproportionately allocated to governmental, military, and now, in this international extension of the pattern, supranational institutional actors, while affected communities remain largely the spoken-about rather than the speaking.

6.1.5 Representation of victims

Consistent with the transitivity pattern above, victims appear overwhelmingly as grammatical Goals or Affected participants of material processes (“gunmen killed at least 200 people”, “militants killed at least 27”; [USCIRF, 2025a](#)) rather than as quoted sources with independent verbal agency, with the partial exception of testimonial quotations gathered by advocacy organisations like Christian Solidarity International, which include first-person statements from survivors ([CSI, 2025](#)). This pattern reproduces, within the institutional reporting genre, a hierarchy of voice in which those with formal political or advocacy standing are constructed as analysts and spokespersons while affected communities remain largely the described rather than the describing.

6.2 Discursive practice

6.2.1 Production and circulation of the reports

CPC-related reporting on Nigeria is produced through a layered institutional process. USCIRF, an independent bipartisan body established by Congress, conducts hearings, country visits, and the preparation of annual reports and country updates, culminating in formal recommendations to the Secretary of State ([USCIRF, 2025a, 2025b](#)). The Secretary of State then exercises statutory discretion in accepting, modifying, or declining these recommendations when making the formal CPC designa-

tion, a process that in Nigeria's case has produced markedly different outcomes across administrations despite substantially continuous underlying USCIRF advocacy (CSI, 2025; USCIRF, 2025a). Once issued, designation announcements circulate rapidly through multiple channels: official government statements, congressional press releases, advocacy-organisation communications, and mainstream news coverage, each of which re-voices and re-contextualises the original designation language for distinct audiences (ABC News, 2025; ADF International, 2025; Archdiocese of San Antonio, 2025).

6.2.2 Intertextuality and recontextualisation

Intertextuality is pervasive throughout the corpus, and it operates through a process closely matching what Reisigl and Wodak (2009) call recontextualisation: a claim originating in one genre is carried into another, often with a shift in modality or specificity. USCIRF's reporting explicitly references prior hearings, including a May 2025 hearing on "Governance in Nigeria: A Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief" (USCIRF, 2025c) and an August 2024 country update (USCIRF, 2025b), establishing a chain of self-citation that lends cumulative authority to successive reports. Congressional materials cite casualty estimates attributed to Representative Riley Moore's office and to the faith-based monitoring organisation Open Doors, which is reported to find that more Christians are killed annually in Nigeria than in the rest of the world combined (ABC News, 2025); this figure, originating in advocacy-sector monitoring, is recontextualised first into congressional rhetoric and then into mainstream news synthesis, acquiring an increasingly authoritative, taken-for-granted status at each step even though its underlying methodology is not re-examined at any stage in the chain. Christian Solidarity International similarly invokes documentation gathered over what it describes as fifteen years of monitoring "systematic attacks against Christians", explicitly referencing a January 2020 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom in the British Parliament as corroborating evidence (CSI, 2025). This dense web of cross-referencing performs an important legitimating function: each text borrows authority from, and lends authority to, the others, producing an impression of convergent, independently verified consensus even where the underlying sources substantially overlap or share common advocacy origins.

6.2.3 Authority and institutional voice

The institutional voice of CPC reporting is constructed through specific genre conventions: the citation of statutory definitions, the invocation of named commissioners and officials, and the use of formal designation language ("the United States must... designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern"; USCIRF, 2025c). This voice projects neutrality and expertise through its bureaucratic register, even as the underlying judgements it encodes are substantially shaped by sustained advocacy campaigning, congressional lobbying, and contested domestic American religious politics (Archdiocese of San Antonio, 2025). The authority of the genre, in other words, derives as much from its institutional form, the fact that it is uttered by a Commission, a Department, or a Senator, as from any claim to disinterested fact-finding, consistent with Fairclough's (1989, 1992) general observation that discursive practice naturalises particular representations by routing them through socially sanctioned producers of authoritative text.

6.3 Social practice

At the level of social practice, the corpus can be read as encoding a discernible, though not absolute, tendency to foreground religious persecution, and particularly anti-Christian persecution, as the primary interpretive lens for Nigerian insecurity, even though the underlying USCIRF documentation itself records blasphemy-law enforcement affecting Muslims and humanists as well as Christians,

alongside banditry, herder–farmer land conflict, and weak state capacity as contributing factors (USCIRF, 2025b). This is not to suggest that the documented violence is fabricated, nor that USCIRF's own reporting is monolithically one-sided; the country update itself is comparatively careful to register religious diversity among victims. Rather, the cumulative effect of the wider corpus, particularly once advocacy and congressional recontextualisation are taken into account, is a narrowing of emphasis toward a single dominant frame, consistent with van Dijk's (1998, 2006) account of how discourse producers' shared mental models shape which aspects of a complex reality become discursively salient as the text moves through successive retellings.

The CPC mechanism inherently encodes an asymmetric power relation: the United States, through its Secretary of State, possesses the unilateral statutory authority to designate, sanction, or waive sanctions against Nigeria, while Nigeria possesses no equivalent formal mechanism to designate or sanction the United States in turn (U.S. Department of State, 2024). This structural asymmetry is reproduced discursively through the generic and transitivity patterns already discussed: the United States and its institutions consistently occupy the position of evaluator, monitor, and potential sanctioning authority (the Sayer of verbal processes such as “recommended” and “designated”), while Nigeria occupies the position of the evaluated, monitored, and potentially sanctioned object (the Goal of those same processes). Even sympathetic discourse, like that produced by Nigerian Christian voices welcoming the 2025 designation (CSI, 2025), operates within this asymmetric frame, since the relief expressed is relief that a foreign power has finally acted, rather than an assertion of reciprocal Nigerian discursive authority over American conduct.

These power relations carry plausible implications for Nigerian sovereignty and global perception, though the present qualitative study can identify a pattern more confidently than it can establish a precise causal effect on investment or diplomatic outcomes. A CPC designation, irrespective of its underlying accuracy, functions globally as a reputational signal that may shape foreign perception of Nigeria's governance capacity. The discursive construction of Nigeria as a singular, undifferentiated object of concern, rather than as a complex federation in which specific states, agencies, and non-state actors bear differentiated responsibility, risks flattening this complexity in ways that may complicate, rather than assist, the stated policy goal of protecting vulnerable religious communities, since it offers limited discursive purchase for distinguishing reform-minded Nigerian state actors from those genuinely complicit in tolerating violence.

7 Findings

The analysis identifies three dominant linguistic patterns across the nine-document corpus. Firstly, a pattern of register-graded lexical intensification, in which statutory terms (“systematic”, “egregious”, “ongoing”) dominate the official USCIRF and State Department texts, while maximally intensified civilisational terms (“genocidal”, “existential threat”) appear only in the secondary advocacy texts, producing a graded rather than uniform intensity across the genre. Secondly, a pattern of strategic modal variation, in which categorical, unhedged assertions of governmental culpability coexist with hedged, evidentially cautious treatment of specific factual claims such as casualty figures and attack attributions. Thirdly, a pattern of asymmetric naming and transitivity, in which non-state armed groups are nominated with discrete specificity and consistently occupy the Actor role in material processes of violence, while the Nigerian state is referenced through diffuse, totalising labels and appears chiefly in relational processes of toleration or permission, and in which institutional actors

dominate verbal processes while victims are predominantly constructed as grammatical Goals rather than speaking Sayers.

The corpus as a whole leans toward framing Nigeria's security crisis primarily through a religious-persecution lens, with a particular emphasis on Christian victimisation, even though USCIRF's own country-level reporting registers a more religiously heterogeneous pattern of victimisation, including the prosecution of Muslims and humanists under blasphemy statutes (USCIRF, 2025b), which privilege faith-based advocacy sources and selectively foreground casualty statistics emphasising Christian deaths (ABC News, 2025). This produces a discourse in which the religious-persecution frame achieves a degree of interpretive prominence in the wider corpus that is not fully proportionate to the documented complexity of the underlying conflict dynamics as described in the primary USCIRF source material.

7.1 Ideological tendencies in representation

1. A tendency toward state-centric attribution of responsibility, in which the Nigerian government is discursively constructed as the primary accountable agent, chiefly through relational rather than material transitivity roles, even for violence perpetrated by non-state actors, consistent with the statutory logic of the IRFA, which targets governmental "toleration" rather than non-state perpetration as such.
2. A tendency toward civilisational framing in advocacy-proximate discourse specifically, in which Nigerian violence is positioned within a global narrative of Christian persecution, a tendency that is markedly less pronounced in the primary USCIRF and State Department texts than in the secondary advocacy material.
3. A tendency toward asymmetric epistemic authority, in which American institutional and advocacy voices occupy the Sayer role in verbal processes of evaluation and fact finding, while Nigerian governmental responses are reported largely as reactive statements rather than as independent analytical contributions to the discourse.
4. A tendency toward discursive volatility tracking changes in designation status and, plausibly, in U.S. domestic politics, with the lexical and evaluative intensity of advocacy and congressional commentary surrounding Nigeria fluctuating noticeably between the 2021 removal and the 2025 re-designation, even though the underlying USCIRF assessment of conditions on the ground remained substantially continuous across this period.

8 Limitations of this study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the corpus, while explicitly defined and reported in full in Table 1, is small, nine documents totalling an estimated nine thousand words, and the findings should accordingly be read as a close reading of a bounded textual sample rather than as a statistically generalisable account of the entire population of CPC-related reporting since 1999. Secondly, the qualitative coding of lexical items, modality, and transitivity roles was conducted by a single analyst across two reading passes; this constitutes an internal consistency check rather than a formal inter-rater reliability procedure, and a multi-coder replication would strengthen confidence in the categorical judgements reported in Tables 2 and 3. Thirdly, the study does not, and does not attempt to, independently verify the factual accuracy of the human-rights claims contained in the corpus, casualty figures, attack attributions, and the like are treated as discursive objects rather than adjudicated as true or false, which is appropriate to a discourse-analytic study but means the findings

cannot be read as a verdict on the underlying human-rights situation in Nigeria. Next, the attribution of ideological tendency to discourse producers is necessarily inferential; identifying a recurrent textual pattern is not equivalent to establishing the intention behind it, and alternative, non-ideological explanations for some patterns (like genre convention or legal drafting constraints) cannot be wholly excluded on the basis of textual evidence alone. Finally, the study's literature review, while expanded considerably beyond an initial draft, still draws on a literature search that was not conducted as a fully systematic, protocol-driven review; the claim that this is among the first CDA studies of CPC reporting on Nigeria should therefore be read as a claim of comparative scarcity in the literature located, not as a definitive bibliometric finding.

9 Conclusion

This study has applied Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, supplemented by van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and Van Leeuwen's sociosemantic categories, to a purposively defined and fully specified corpus of nine Country of Particular Concern and related religious-freedom documents on Nigeria spanning 2019 to 2025. At the textual level, the analysis identified a register-graded pattern of lexical intensification, strategically variable modality, and an asymmetric naming and transitivity pattern in which non-state actors are nominated as material Actors of violence while the Nigerian state is more often constructed as a relational, tolerating presence. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis traced a dense intertextual network linking USCIRF reporting, congressional advocacy, faith-based organisational documentation, and media circulation, through which institutional authority is constructed and reinforced via recontextualisation. At the level of social practice, the analysis situated these textual and discursive patterns within a structurally asymmetric power relationship between the United States and Nigeria, and identified a discernible, though not absolute, ideological tendency toward religious-persecution framing that privileges Christian victimisation and state-centric attribution of responsibility, with discursive intensity in the wider corpus fluctuating more than the underlying USCIRF assessment itself.

10 Recommendations

1. *Strengthen evidence-based and context-sensitive reporting.* The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Department of State should distinguish clearly between verified facts, allegations, reported claims, and interpretive judgements. Reports should provide transparent sourcing and contextual explanations to minimise ambiguity in the attribution of responsibility.
2. *Improve the representation of religious diversity.* Reporting agencies and advocacy organisations should adequately represent the experiences of Christians, Muslims, humanists, and other affected groups. This would promote a more comprehensive understanding of religious-freedom violations without diminishing the suffering of any particular community.
3. *Increase Nigerian participation in international reporting.* Nigerian government institutions, civil-society organisations, religious leaders, human-rights bodies, and affected communities should be given meaningful opportunities to contribute evidence and contextual perspectives to international assessments. Their participation should complement, rather than replace, independent investigation and accountability.
4. *Promote differentiated attribution of responsibility.* International reporting bodies should distinguish among federal and state authorities, specific security agencies, non-state armed groups, and other relevant actors when assigning responsibility for violations. Such precision would help

prevent the generalisation of allegations against particular institutions or individuals to Nigeria as a whole.

5. *Expand research on religious-freedom discourse.* Future researchers should examine larger, longitudinal corpora of official reports, advocacy publications, Nigerian government responses, and local media accounts. Where appropriate, corpus-linguistic techniques, independent coding, and interviews with relevant stakeholders could complement Critical Discourse Analysis and strengthen the reliability and contextual depth of subsequent findings.

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