



**The campaign around Mu'allim Ibrahim el-Zakzaky and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria**  
Massoud Shadjareh, Islamic Human Rights Commission  
[www.ihrc.org.uk](http://www.ihrc.org.uk)

Presented at WOCMES, 17 July 2018

World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies Seville, July 16th – 20th 2018

Congrès Mondial des Études sur le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord Seville, du 16 au 20  
Juillet 2018

PANEL: 'Sectarianism Driven by Political Interests: The Case of Nigeria and Islamic  
Movement of Nigeria'

\*\*\*

As a human rights activist and as part of a human rights organisation, I am used to and we are used to usually rising up when injustice takes place and innocent people are affected.

As a small - medium size human rights org, we have to be very wary of our limited resources, we are careful to target our resources where others are not concentrating. It becomes more incumbent on us to rise up to occasions when the peaceful movement or individual which is being targeted just because they want to bring a change against corruption and injustice, an din support of empowerment of their people. The case of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria and Sheikh Zakzaky covers all those criteria.

Our organisation started in 1997 and one of our first cases was Nigeria when Abacha imprisoned over 1000 members of Islamic Movement, including Sheikh Zakzaky and all his family including a 6 month old child. That campaign eventually led to the freedom of all those detained. Therefore we have had a close history in support of people in Nigeria in

general and the Islamic Movement in particular. On 15 December 2015 we were informed of a huge mobilisation of armed forces against Islamic Movement in Zaria to start with at their centre. This wasn't by any means a coincidence or accidental. It was well organised. Hours before the attack the military was mobilised and in place and the centre was surrounded and ammunition was distributed. Therefore the excuse of the armed forces that this was an accidental incident which was as a result of blockade by members of the Islamic Movement is well proven through videos, interviews and even by members of armed forces and police testimony in the subsequent inquiry (held by the state of Kano) to be false.

I clearly remember when, following the armed forces' mobilisation and the start of the attack and the escalation of it to the residence of Sheikh Zakzaky which was miles away. That 28 hour period was one of the most difficult times that I have witnessed. I was hardly able to sleep all night and we were in direct contact with both locations of the Centre and the Residence. We were receiving information of the scale of massacres, attacks and murders of innocent men, women and children. The only other time I remember this sort of horrifying information was at the time of the Bosnian war when I was on the receiving end of information when the Serbs were involved in their genocide against hopeless innocent civilians in enclaves including Gorazde, Zepa and Srebrenica. It's a very horrifying experience, sitting miles away, receiving information and feeling helpless. We started our campaign on 15 December, even that night we continued as an organisation – even as a family – in trying to awaken and inform the world of these barbaric acts and trying to get coverage and awareness so we could stop it or minimise it. Unfortunately the Nigerian armed forces implemented killing almost 1000 people including many women and children,

which includes three sons of Sheikh Zakzaky who were murdered, and his sister who was burned alive.

Sheikh Zakzaky himself was shot and brutally beaten. One eye was gouged out and the other severely damaged, leaving him almost blind. He sustained other injuries and continues to suffer without adequate treatment for his injuries over two and a half years later. His wife Mu'allimah Zeena sustained two gunshot wounds and has not had the bullets removed. When being removed from his residence, Sheikh Zakzaky was dragged by soldiers over the dead bodies of his sons. Both Sheikh Zakzaky and Mu'allimah Zeena are held in illegal detention in violation of a court order issued at the end of December 2016 demanding their release. They are being held by State Security Agencies largely incommunicado who have claimed that they are doing so for their own safety. Recently trumped up charges have been brought against the Sheikh.

#### What has been done

We have organised a comprehensive report of the massacre including names of all those killed or missing presumed buried in one of the mass graves, which we have now identified. This became the catalyst for campaigns both through the courts and in civil society. We have had a number of meetings with the ICC, and we understand that as a result of our report a preliminary investigation started which has now moved forward. We also raised the matter both at the Human Rights Council at the UN (which is preparing a report for its next session), the UN working group on Arbitrary Detention and the EU. We also release a weekly digest for journalists, political actors, activists, campaigners and civil society on Nigeria and specifically the Islamic Movement cases.

What is so astonishing is that while the brutality of the system and the authorities, and the impunity surrounding them, the Islamic Movement have continued their campaign on a daily basis and refuse to be dragged into any sort of violence. Their campaigns include since the beginning of 2018, daily demonstrations in various cities, but in particular Abuja. They have faced police and army violence sustaining injuries, arrests and even some fatalities.

We at IHRC with other international partners, including the Universal Justice Network have organised global campaigns in support of justice for the Islamic Movement.

#### Islamic Movement Responding

What makes the Zaria Massacre and the response to it different from all other conflicts, brutalities and injustices is not the brutality of the perpetrators but the principles by which that brutality is being responded to by its victims.

In summer 2014, on Al-Quds Day (the annual pro-Palestine protest around the world on the last Friday of Ramadan) when demonstrators in Zaria were attacked by the military resulting in the death of 18 members of the Islamic Movement as well as bystanders and unaffiliated demonstrators, including three sons of Sheikh Zakzaky, it was widely thought that this incident would push the Islamic Movement to respond with violence. However, Sheikh Zakzaky's response at the funerals was to state that the movement's greatest weapon was the truth and that the struggle for truth and justice would remain a non-violent one. The idea that there should not be a violent response or indeed that violence or armed resistance should not form any part of the movement is particularly unusual given the movement's

capacity to organise, and its sheer scale of membership estimated at 15 million across Nigeria.

After the killings on Al-Quds Day 2014, I went to Zaria and witnessed a huge number of people from different backgrounds, government officials, leaders of different Muslim communities, including Salafis, Sufis and others, and people from Christian communities, were coming in huge numbers every night to Sheikh Zakzaky's house to give condolences. It was extremely moving, in particular I saw two Christian ladies. Knowing that in some places entrenched and sometime there are severe structural conflicts between 'Christian' and 'Muslim' communities, I questioned them as to why they had come. They responded that while conflicts still erupted, every time there was communal violence, Sheikh Zakzaky sent members of the movement to protect their houses. This type of understanding of social injustice that transcends longstanding narratives or otherisation and social and political organisation in Nigeria, is both a powerful and transformative part of the Islamic Movement's appeal across religious and political divides in Nigeria, as well as a unique facet of Islamic political and social mobilisation.

What are the implications for this approach both in Nigeria, and for political mobilisation, and for the human rights community and civil society purportedly working in support of justice, to bring about a change in unjust scenarios? To aver to recent events, Muhammadu Buhari, despite the foregoing has been appointed an ambassador for anti-corruption on behalf of the African Union, and has written an op-ed for the UK's Guardian newspaper last week. This begs the further question, how do brutal systems and their figureheads become

cause celebre in Westernised settings as anti-corruption campaigners, and serious political figures?

1. Working around the system?

Whilst using the courts to advocate for justice when their figures have been detained, the Islamic Movement do not in general work with existing political authorities, but rather seek to engage with the people marginalised, ostracised or completely neglected by the state. This involves distribution of aid, providing medical services and schools, as well as protection in cases of state sponsored or communal violence, as well as opening up spaces for political discussions that seek to address systemic issues rather than nominal or partisan change in the makeup of the personalities within the system. It is worth noting that after the end of the military junta in Nigeria in 1998, Islamic Movement did not oppose the transition to so-called democracy, however they pointed out many of the intrinsic failings of the proposed system, including its continued disenfranchisement of those most in need, as well as the problematic of switching between Christian and Muslim Presidencies at a constitutional level.

Notwithstanding that, the increase in corruption, the further collapse of social welfare institutions and the impoverishment of the population, and rise of sectarian narratives (Christian / Muslim, Sunni / Shia, North / South etc), has led the Islamic Movement to argue for systemic change based on Islamic principles in Nigeria. This has been portrayed externally in terms of demonised tropes of 'Sharia' and 'hudood' but which is understood at the grassroots level to be about redistribution of wealth, services, and the making good on

the promises of a government that serves its citizens, which affords equal citizenship in the emotional and political sense, and which seeks to eradicate inequality.

## 2. Resistance is not rebellion

One of the most notable principles of resistance against injustice and corruption in Nigeria by the Islamic Movement is that they very clearly understand that they are doing that to bring a change within their own family of Nigerians, and under no circumstances do they want to turn that into a civil conflict. This conceptualisation of community transcends otherisation and bucks the trend of Islamic political movements that define themselves against particularised Muslim identities.

Sheikh Zakzaky has repeatedly responded to people who question him, as to whether the Islamic Movement is a Shia movement. His response has been Islamic Movement has got no fiqh associated it. It is a movement to liberate and empower all the people of Nigeria. This is arguably – though not expressed as thus – a liberation theology.

### Islamic Movement as model

As a model for Islamic political movements, there is a crucial relationship between Islamic Movement model and other South West Asian movements. On the one hand it is not pacifistic because of intrinsic beliefs in pacifism e.g. it supports Hizbullah and Hamas vociferously. However it reimagines that movement for liberation differently and essentially in the Nigerian context, which bucks the trend of accepted colonial legacies of political

organisation. Namely divide and rule, identitarian politics around Muslimness, otherising of Christians, Jews, animists, and also other Muslims, Arabness versus non-Arabness etc. It reimagines party politics in a Nigerian context as beyond both identity politics but also as movements versus party politics in a failed democratic system.

### Decolonising the Human Rights Gaze

So to return to the question, how do brutal systems and their figureheads become cause celebre in Westernised settings as anti-corruption campaigners, and serious political figures? - we need to understand that we are complicit if we cannot accept that there are non-Westernised or non-conformist transformative movements. Sheikh Zakzaky and the Islamic Movement's case is not just important because they are severely oppressed, but because of what they offer as an alternative to existing corrupt power systems and narratives of power AND by way of effective change. This includes understanding the role of colonial power structures in so-called post-colonial countries like Nigeria, in which political social and economic interests of old colonial powers are still embedded in the "new" system, to the extent that they take priority over the interests of disempowered Nigerians. A brutal and symbolic example: troops sent by the US to "find" the kidnapped girls taken by Boko Haram, were redeployed within a month to areas containing US mining business interests.

Nigeria is by no means a poor nation, but we have to ask the question, will 'solving' corruption, as portrayed as the endemic Nigerian, and even African, experience actually



resolve issues around redistribution of wealth, political and social justice issues? The narrative of corruption tackles only a particular type of “African” crime that impacts politically and economically, and leaves unchallenged the institutions which are ultimately set up to serve colonial interests be they for governments or multinationals or both.

Without doing so, you can appoint someone like Buhari as an ‘anti-corruption’ campaigner, who can simultaneously preside over a corrupt army, police forces, federal and state governments who do not even recognise the orders of their own courts, and routinely sit in contempt of court. In this scenario Buhari can write an opinion piece for The Guardian setting out his ‘credentials’ unchallenged, while Nigeria under his premiership is investigated for crimes against humanity against the Islamic Movement as well as other actors.

As human rights campaigners we need to be prepared to tackle all types of oppression, and look to all types of solutions.