



El-Zakzaky: Politics, Religion and the Persecution of Shiites in Nigeria

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The Nigerian government has [said](#) time and again that the reason it has continued to keep Sheikh El-Zakzaky behind bars for over three years now is only as a matter of public safety and in the best interest of the nation. However, there are many who believe that the government has an axe to grind with the Muslim cleric and the adherents of his Shia faith. Whatever the reason that this government is chasing its cause against the Shiites, the major concern is the possibility and propriety of having an administration settle a score under the guise of “national interest” and public good.

The continued detention of El-Zakzaky, his wife (Zeenat) and two other members of the Shia sect in Nigeria leaves very little or nothing to be desired, especially because they have been held in the custody of security agencies, even after courts have several times given injunctions granting them bail. In some quarters, this development has earned the present government negative labels, with many saying that the administration is high-handed, overreaching and dictatorial in its operations.

But why will a government that came into power on the promise of justice and fairness – as symbolised in its Muslim-Christian ticket – risk being tainted by what now can only be called a mishandling of the Zakzaky case? Who is this sheikh? What makes him an important personality worth the time and resources of both the Kaduna state government and the Federal Government of Nigeria?

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Who is Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky?

A disrupter of the status quo, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky is an outspoken critic of the northern political elites, including Nasir El-Rufai, the current governor of Kaduna state, the base from where he (El-Zakzaky) operates. Born within the same generation, about seven years apart, El-Zakzaky and El-Rufai have a “hidden-history” that tends to pit them against themselves, leading to a power tussle that cuts through deep religious and political contours.

The history between these two leaders has been silent for quite a while and up until now, not many were aware of, nor were able to draw the parallels that build a solid case for why the friction between El-Zakzaky and El-Rufai goes beyond a matter of public safety. The governor did put it in his defence why the Nigerian government is right in having kept the sheikh in custody for way too long, depriving him his basic rights and needs, including denial of access to proper medical attention.

El-Rufai was born in Daudawa within the Faskari local government area of Kastina, state which was carved out of Kaduna, while El-Zakzaky was born in Zaria, a major province at the heart of Kaduna state. Hence, by virtue of birth places, the Muslim cleric holds a greater claim to the land – he would be seen more as a true son of the soil than the governor, who moved from Katsina to join his uncle in Kaduna following the death of his father at age eight.

Both men attended the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in Zaria (between 1976 and 1979). While El-Zakzaky studied economics, El-Rufai studied quantity surveying. They both excelled in their different disciplines, with each bagging a first-class honour, though Zakzaky’s certificate had been denied him by the university authorities due to his Islamic activities.

As a student, El-Zakzaky was an active Islamic unionist; he participated in several northern Nigeria protest movements in the 1970s, the reason he was expelled. While at ABU, he rose to become a Secretary-General of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) at the main campus of the university, a group which El-Rufai admits having been a part of.

In the wake of Zakzaky’s incarceration, El-Rufai would later make a broadcast in which he said, “I know El-Zakzaky personally. We were both students at the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. We were both active in the Muslim Student’s Society, so I know the animal I’m dealing with. Many of those making comments on this issue don’t know the history, I was in ABU when El-Zakzaky was dismissed, I know him.”

El-Rufai’s comment hints at a possible dissonance between these two leaders, a grievance which some believe took a fiercer nature later as they metamorphosed into more prominent figures within the northern region.

El-Zakzaky rose to the position of Vice President (International Affairs) of the national body of MSSN in 1979, the same year when Ruholla Khomeini led the Iranian Revolution that saw the overthrow of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, bringing an end to a 2,500-year Persian monarchy, and ushering in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was [this revolution](#) that inspired El-Zakzaky to join the Shia faith. He would later travel to Iran and become Nigeria’s first Shia cleric, while El-Rufai would later attend post-graduate programmes at Harvard Business School and Georgetown University. Both men would continue to break new grounds and grow in influence, perhaps in a

subtle bid to charm the teeming millions in Kaduna and win the heart of the state.

El-Rufai would go on to establish his own firm, making a name for himself both in the private and public sectors, up to the point of serving as Minister for the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Abuja. Soon, it was time for him to govern Kaduna, a position which would see him become number one in the state and make him one of the most influential and powerful elites within the northern region.

But that autonomous power was not to be, at least not for a while, because while El-Rufai gained political influence, El-Zakzaky was also growing very powerful in Zaria, which used to be the capital of the Hausa Kingdom of Zazzau.

Upon becoming governor, El-Rufai tried to implement some new policies. A close observation of some of these policies would have many analysts speculating that they were aimed at crippling the operations of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), which is led by El-Zakzaky. One major policy that was said to be aimed at the IMN is the introduction of a bill seeking to regulate both Christian and Muslim clerics alike. However, this could not be enforced as they were mired in controversy and were never revisited again.

El-Rufai knew something needed to be done about the IMN, lest he lose control of Kaduna, which is the home of northern elites and occupies a strategic position as the political capital of the north.

With a growing population of over four million, there were fears that El-Zakzaky might soon be running a parallel state within Kaduna. Thus, a force higher than the state seemed to be the only way to quash what seemed like an uprising agenda, which Sheikh Zakzaky is said to have been pushing for years. The spiritual leader of the IMN is believed to be committed to the goal of applying a more rigorous application of the Islamic legal and administrative system to Nigeria and ultimately turning the nation into a full Islamic state - claims that over the years have been debunked and described as unfounded and lacking in substance.

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El-Rufai had said in an [interview](#) that Zakzaky and his fellow Shiites had no regard for him as Governor of Kaduna, neither had they any regard for President Muhammadu Buhari. The Governor's accusations bordered around treason but without valid proof, they have been viewed as mere allegations and a desperate attempt at discrediting El-Zakzaky.

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Many analysts disagree, saying that the events in the 1990s do not have so much that could tie the president directly to El-Zakzaky. There are those that argue that beyond power and political struggles that characterised the north at the time and even now, the rift between El-Zakzaky and the state holds in it a deep political undertone.

The Sunni-Shia rift

El-Zakzaky is the first Shia sheikh in Nigeria, a country where Sunni Muslims make up about 50 per cent of the population. So, the Shia-Sunni dichotomy cannot be ruled out in the case between El-Zakzaky, El-Rufai and President Muhammadu Buhari. The Shia cleric was becoming too powerful and the Shia sect was growing in numbers in a state run by a Sunni Muslim (El-Rufai) within a region made up majorly of the Sunni sect, and in a country ruled by a Sunni adherent (Buhari). It was only a matter of time before his growing influence would become a thing of regional and national concern.

Sheikh Zakzaky's troubles started as far back as the 1980s and 1990s when he was imprisoned countless times for alleged seditious speeches and calls for revolution. Reports suggest that these messages were often circulated in cassettes. El-Zakzaky's use of the words "civil disobedience" and "recalcitrance", especially under military regimes, saw him rise as a voice for the oppressed, giving him prominence and positioning him as a living martyr.

They say nothing endears a leader more to his people than sacrifice. Perhaps that is how El-Zakzaky won the hearts of many followers in the north and the admiration of thousands all over the world.

A letter written by the sheikh's wife, Zeenat, to President Muhammadu Buhari revealed how the sheikh lost six sons from nine children he had. They were killed in two different military attacks on the IMN, the first being the Zaria Quds Day Massacre in 2014 and the other being the 2015 Zaria Massacre, which eventually led to the arrest of El-Zakzaky, his wife and several other members of the Shiite sect.

Zeenat, in her [letter](#), narrated how in July 2014, the army under the leadership of President Goodluck Jonathan, extrajudiciously killed three of her sons among 35 Muslims exercising their constitutional rights of assembly. She wrote of how she and other members of the Shia sect in Nigeria believed that with the emergence of Buhari as a Muslim president, they would get justice, but that was not to be. The sheikh's wife went on to speak of how in December 2015, the army under the command of Buhari's General Tukur Buratai "massacred about 1,000 Shia Muslims across Zaria after some members of the sect blocked the General's convoys".

According to [Zeenat's letter](#), the army would later carry out further assaults, destroying the sect's properties across six locations in Zaria. They would go on to bomb and demolish El-Zakzaky's family home, killing another three of the Sheikh's sons. Zeenat further claimed that under the Kaduna state government led by El-Rufai and on General Buratai's command, the army went in the dead of the night to secretly bury members of the Islamic Movement whom they had killed. The sheikh's wife said that both men, women and children were buried in an unmarked mass pit at Mando cemetery.

There has been no exhumation of the graves, no apologies made, no list of names of victims published, no investigation, no reports on findings and no atonement.

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The army came out to debunk the sect's claims, saying that the clash between it and the sect was stirred by a provocation from the group. The Chief of Army Staff, Lt-Gen Tukur Buratai, went on to tell the National Assembly that he escaped being assassinated by members of the Shiite Muslim sect.

He told them of how, contrary to claims by the sect, its members were heavily armed, and they violently confronted him and his convoy on their way to Zaria.

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In April 2018, the Kaduna state government levelled an [eight-count charge](#) against the sheikh, his wife and two others. Their offences included the murder of a soldier (a corporal named Yakubu Dankaduna). Other [counts](#) included alleged acts of abetting the unlawful assembly of members of the IMN and inciting of disturbance by encouraging members of the sect to block major roads, including Sokoto road, Sabon Gari and others within Zaria and its environs. They were also accused of promoting unlawful assembly even though the Kaduna state government did not proscribe them until after the 2015 clash.

The proscription of the IMN and the continued detention of El-Zakzaky and other members of his sect, as well as the continued arrest of Shiites across Nigeria's northern region, have only gone further to push the narrative of anti-Shi'ism moves all over the world, making El-Zakzaky the new face of Shia prosecution globally.

Analysts argue that the moves made by the state and federal governments against the IMN are not unconnected; they reveal the prejudice, hatred, discrimination and violence against Shia Muslims because of their religious beliefs, traditional and cultural heritage. This bias stems from a dispute over the right successor to Prophet Muhammad, leading to the formation of two main sects; the Sunni and the Shia. Many Sunni rulers perceive the Shia as a threat both to their political and religious authority, a scenario which critics believe is playing out between El-Zakzaky (a Shia sheikh) and two Sunni leaders (Governor Nasir El-Rufai and President Muhammadu Buhari).

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Analysts believe that the Saudi Arabia-linked Sunni denominated northern political and clerical establishment is using the machinery of the Nigerian government to stage a war against fellow Muslims and rivals - Iran-linked Shia Muslims. And though the Nigerian government may seek to absolve itself of any blame in this case against the IMN, it still faces charges of operating with impunity by keeping Shia leaders in custody even after the courts have granted them bail.

There have been several claims linking the Shia sect in Nigeria to extremists groups like Boko Haram and Hezbollah, but many experts on security issues disagree, especially because even the Boko Haram terror group see Shiites as infidels that should be ousted. Moreover, no interactions between Boko Haram and the Shiites have ever been established, nor has there been any established link between the leadership of the IMN and any terror group, including the jihadists that operate in Nigeria's northeastern region.

In light of the fact that almost every theory about El-Zakzaky fails to hold water, why should he still be languishing in state custody? Critics believe that the only bias at play in this case is the Shia-Sunni dichotomy. They argue that the chasm of social distance between the mainly Sunni northern political and clerical establishment and their rank and file is accessing economic and political

opportunities, which are largely viewed as the preordained preserve of a religious order, a premise which the Shiites vehemently dispute.

Saudi-Iran proxy war

It is worrisome that Nigeria tends to be inching dangerously towards becoming the next theatre of the Saudi-Iran proxy war stirred by the great schism that occurred in 632 AD upon the death of the Holy Prophet Muhammad over who was his rightful successor, ultimately resulting in the Sunni-Shia divide. This is especially more troubling in the rise of reports that there is a plot to Islamise Nigeria.

There are fears that the state's crackdown on Shiites will cause the group to go underground and wage an insurgency war like the Salafi-jihad group Boko Haram, though that seems a bit far-fetched. However, if the IMN continues to use protest marches as its tool to fight for the freedom of its leader, one fears that the situation might degenerate if the sheikh eventually dies in custody or more of its members continue to be arrested and killed in clashes with military operatives.

Frail Shia-Sunni relations are blamed by many for what is now seen as the persecution of Shiites who make up about 5 per cent of the Muslim population in Nigeria. The nation has the largest Muslim population in Africa, predominantly Sunni of the Maliki school of thought. However, there is a significant Shia minority in Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Sokoto, the most visible form of the Shia movement in Nigeria being the Islamic Movement in Nigeria led by the embattled Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky.

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Nigeria already has a lot on its plate with regard to ethno-religious violence. The Christian-Muslim gulfs are yet to be properly bridged and this has led to so many clashes across the nation, including the farmer-herder crisis in several parts of the country. Whether keeping El-Zakzaky unlawfully behind bars is in the best interest of the nation or if it is a subtle war between the Sunni and Shia Muslims, Nigeria does not need another ethno-religious fracas, hence the need to handle the Shiites appropriately.

Seventy-six-year-old President Muhammadu Buhari has won the 2019 presidential race, which was somewhat bumpy and could easily have been marred by violence. Perhaps there are some Shia members who had hoped that he (Buhari) would be defeated by a more liberal Muslim opponent (Atiku Abubakar), but that was not to be.

Now that the president must continue to steer the course of the nation for the next four years, one wonders what will become of Shiites in Nigeria. Will Buhari release Sheikh El-Zakzaky and grant him his freedom? Or will Buhari's second term and the cleric's continued incarceration be seen as an opportunity that the Sunnis can use to crush the rising Shia population in Africa's most populous nation, and by extension oust its rivals from West Africa and Africa as a whole?

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