

Muhammad Ibraheem Zakzaky is one of the children of the leader of the proscribed Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Sheikh Ibraheem El-Zakzaky, who along with his wife, Zeenah, have been incarcerated by the Federal Government since 2015. Muhammad tells GBENRO ADEOYE in an online interview, his views about his parents' incarceration, proscription of the organisation and allegations against them

**Your father, Ibraheem El-Zakzaky, has been in the custody of the Department of State Services since 2015, and not much has been heard of his case recently. What can you say about the progress of the case?**

Last year, the presiding judge was away for electoral tribunal duty. It was during this time that his (my father's) legal team submitted an application for medical leave to India. After my parents' return from India, the presiding judge, Justice Gideon Kurada, returned to preside over the case. During the first sitting, his legal team complained to the judge that access to their clients was being restricted. For this reason, the judge ordered the DSS to hand over my parents to prison authorities, an order which they promptly complied with. At the moment, all official requests that the judge should continue with the case have been ignored by the court because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Reports in February 2020 said a high court in Kaduna granted El-Zakzaky and his wife, Zeenah, access to their personal physicians, have they been granted access to their doctors?**

Although the controller of prisons in the state initially imposed multiple obstacles in the first few months, we were eventually able to have their doctors visit them. And when the doctors required that they should be taken to medical facilities, this was also done. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the doctors advised that no further trips to the hospital should be arranged for the time being.

**When was the last time you saw your father, El-Zakzaky?**

I saw him a few weeks ago at the Kaduna Prison on Independence Way.

### **What did you talk about?**

I told him about current events since he has no access to news from the outside world. And he told me about his needs regarding health and personal matters. I told him about new births and deaths in the family and the ones that involved loved ones. I was not allowed to see him and my mother at the same time.

### **How would you describe their health conditions the last time you saw them?**

When the Nigerian Army attacked us in December 2015, my parents suffered multiple gunshot wounds. My father lost an eye, and the other eye was also severely injured, affecting his vision to the point that he currently needs glasses with lens thickness of +10 as well as a magnifying glass to read. He has also suffered two strokes during his time with the DSS. According to the doctors who carried out tests on him, his blood also shows traces of lead and cadmium poisoning. This is the result of shrapnel embedded in his head and left hand.

He can in fact be considered to be legally blind. After the final operation was performed on his other eye, his vision deteriorated. Back then, the DSS refused to grant us access to their medical results despite trying for months during which time they didn't allow him to see a doctor. Later, an independent ophthalmologist was finally able to examine him. The results showed that his other eye was developing glaucoma. The eye pressure has also been fluctuating erratically. Both conditions come with a high risk of irreversible damage that can lead to blindness. He is currently on medication designed to stabilise the situation, but his vision has not improved.

My mother was shot at least five times and periodically suffers from extremely painful episodes of abdominal pain due to the presence of large bullet fragments in her abdominal area, which should have been removed long ago. She also suffers from advanced arthritis and should have had knee replacement surgery at least three years ago. The refusal of the DSS to allow the procedure to be done has made her to almost lose function of her knees. It's actually a miracle that she is still able to stand, though she is mostly confined to a wheelchair.

**But some Nigerians initially opposed their continued incarceration were confused when they went to India and returned without getting any treatment because El-Zakzaky refused treatment over there. Shouldn't he have accepted the treatment offered if he was truly sick?**

Prior to our application to have them go on medical leave, a team of doctors from outside Nigeria had come and carried out thorough examinations on my parents. After completing their examination, they wrote a comprehensive report that included recommendations. Since three out of the four doctors were Indians, they recommended India for the list of procedures that were needed. They also recommended a number of hospitals in India.

The report and the recommendations were submitted to the court, which granted them medical leave, stipulating that the government should send representatives for supervisory roles. However, upon their arrival in India, the reception they got was rather hostile. First, they were taken to the hospital under armed guard of the Indian police. Their doctors, who had also travelled to New Delhi to observe and supervise their care, were denied access to them. They were denied even the most basic forms of privacy such that anyone could simply walk into their rooms and toilets which had had their locks removed. Also, the hospital health workers seemed more interested in administering drugs to them without carrying out even a verbal examination. Naturally, my parents became suspicious.

Interestingly, we were surprised at the speed with which officials of the Nigerian Embassy decided to buy return tickets for them rather than rebooking the ones already bought by us. Ultimately, I believe that the government deliberately designed the trip to fail. It is unclear what it is that they told the Indian authorities and the hospital.

Under normal circumstances, when you go to hospital, you don't expect a doctor to simply come out with drugs and needles without so much as asking what is wrong with you. It is also against standard practice for a hospital to deny certified medical practitioners permission to observe what they are doing. When those doctors came to Nigeria, they went to local hospitals and used local equipment under the supervision of local Nigerian doctors. However, at the Indian hospital, the doctors who are also Indians, were not even allowed on the hospital grounds let alone the floor where my parents were being held.

**What do you think about the Federal Government's proscription of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria and position that it is a terrorist organisation?**

This is just one in a long line of shamelessly blatant acts of persecution by this government. The designation – IMN – was created by the regime of former Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) after December 2015, when the Nigerian Army launched an unprovoked attack on places of worship, a cemetery on land owned by my father and my father's house, among other locations. During the attack, over 1,000 people went missing, and about 300 people, including women and children, were later discovered in the custody of the army. The women and children were later released but as many as 150 people were sent to Kaduna Prison and charged with the murder of one soldier, later proved to have been killed in what they called friendly fire. Moreover, none of the accused persons were present at the scene where the soldier died. Yet, they spent about three years behind bars. Meanwhile, over 1,000 people are still missing. Since the incident, the Kaduna State Government has only admitted to burying 347 of them in mass graves. After the December massacre, the state government demolished residences, businesses and schools owned by Shiites in the state despite being duly registered and licensed, and we have documents to prove this.

There have also been constant harassment and arbitrary arrests of people identified as Shiites. Despite the thousands of arrests, demolitions, looting and other acts of terror visited on the community during the last five years, the government has yet to prove a single case of crime committed by a Shiite or IMN member. Even last month, two persons were arrested in Zaria and slammed with various trumped-up charges in a Kaduna court.

The narrative that IMN members are dangerous, extremists, secessionists, maybe even anarchists, was borne out of a desire by this government to justify its atrocities and continue with its persecution against a community, simple and short. You and everyone who disagree can check all news outlets and publications prior to December 2015 for any reference to an organisation that called itself IMN. The acronym was designed by this administration to facilitate and support impunity, and unfortunately, many people within and outside Nigeria have been largely fooled by it. To me, IMN is nothing more than a grandiose spooky acronym designed to enable mass oppression.

**But many people, especially in Kaduna and some states have described you as fanatics, saying in those days, they could not go out during your processions because the atmosphere was usually tense. How would you react to allegations?**

The movement has been active for over 40 years, and during all the seminars, processions and in recent times, the protests against the murder and mass burial of over 1,000 people and the destruction of properties and arbitrary detentions, there has never been any record of vandalism or violence. The issue is about the policy of a government that is determined to respond to any and all gatherings with brute force. For the past four years, protests have been held across the country and the only instances where violence occurred had to do with when the army, police and other arms of the government were sent to attack peaceful demonstrators with force. There were cases, most especially in Kaduna, where local thugs were armed and sent to not only attack protesters, but also ransack homes and business outlets.

**The police and army often say they shoot at IMN members because you attack them during your processions and sometime ago, alleged that you killed a deputy commissioner of police during a protest...**

These accusations have been persistently repeated by them, but repeating it over and over again will never make it true. In December 2015, one of the justifications the army tried to use for its operation that went for days was that it was in response to an assassination attempt on the Army chief. Till date, the Buhari government has not been able to prove allegations of illegal possession of firearms by any member of the Shia community, or even a fancily plausible conspiracy to acquire them. In spite of their best efforts to date, not even a credible rumour exists of possession of weapons such as those carried by the bandits and kidnappers currently roaming free in the northern states.

As for the recent case of the deputy commissioner of police, over 60 people have been arrested and charged with the killing and are currently in prison. However, as the case progressed over the past months, their lawyers were able to demonstrate quite clearly that the man was shot from behind, either deliberately or accidentally by another police officer.

Several suspicious things have come to light; first, the officer was buried some hours after the incident, which is against standard procedure in such a case. Second, the vast majority of those

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arrested were not even at the scene when the incident took place. Third, he was shot from behind while speaking with the protesters, some of whom were also hit along with the officer. Fourth, before the accused were charged to court, they were held by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad for weeks without any explanation, during which time many of them were brutally tortured in an attempt to force them to incriminate themselves. It was only after legal representatives applied pressure that they were transferred to prison and then charged.

### **What kind of person is your father?**

Describing one's father is actually very simple. He is my father. It becomes complicated when he is the victim of terrorism.

### **How did he raise you and your siblings?**

From when we were all young, he always played a huge role in our lives and participated in all the processes of caring for us along with our mother; from bathing to feeding us, cleaning up after us, cooking, etc. He always emphasised the importance of pursuing knowledge and thinking freely, to the extent that he would refrain from sharing his opinions on things he thought we might do in certain ways because he said so. Though he was always quite busy most of the time, he made sure to make time to teach each of us Islamic studies, from jurisprudence to theology, history and many other things. He even got us a lot of education, historical and entertaining books that we might be interested in. He also provided us with educational computer programmes and games.

### **How large is your family?**

If you mean his wife and children, then he is married to Zeenah Ibraheem (our mother), who is in the same prison with him. He has 15 children; nine of them are his biological children and the others are children of friends and relations that he adopted and raised.

**What would you describe as his values?**

He is a man who lives by his words.

**It was once reported that three of his children were killed by the army or police, how did it happen?**

That happened in 2014 when a convoy attacked the rear of an otherwise peaceful demonstration marking the annual international Quds day in support of the Palestinian cause. The ceremony has been taking place all over the world since the late 70s and early 80s in the last week of Ramadan. The convoy, led by a lieutenant colonel at the time, indiscriminately opened fire. One of my brothers, Mahmood, was among those killed on the spot. Three of my brothers, Ahmad, Hamid and Ali, who had driven to the scene to try to approach the soldiers to diffuse the situation, were immediately shot along with others that tried to intervene. The soldiers then put them in their vehicles and took them to Basawa Barracks. At the barracks, Hamid was bayoneted while Ahmad bled out. After a few hours, they took both the dead and the survivors, including Ali, and dumped them in front of Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital at Shika, Zaria.

**What have the clashes with police and army, and the arrest of El-Zakzaky and his detention cost the family as a whole in lives and properties?**

First of all, as far as I am concerned, the word 'clash' is inappropriate when speaking of what happened in December 2015; it was a sudden unexpected attack by the Nigerian Army on a gathering done annually to kick-start the celebrations of the birth of Prophet Muhammad. Looking back now, I can say it was an aggressive and clearly predetermined case of mass murder. The regime has cost me six brothers. Even though the Nigerian Army did kill Ahmad, Hamid and Mahmood, at least we got to bury them, and we were promised a fair inquiry. That was before the Nigerian Army killed, looted and burnt our places in December 2015. The army desecrated their graves. It also cost the family a library of books and records, including a collection of manuscripts. Personally, the most priceless of these was a Quran written by my great grandfather. Their lives are priceless to me. The books are priceless to the world. The cost is incalculable.

**Does your father or the IMN have any link to Iran as the government has said?**

As a Shia, he is part of a religious community that exists in all countries around the world. One of the 12 Imams (of Shia) was buried in Mashhad, Iran. It is an important pilgrimage site. So yes, my father has been to Iran, all Shia like to visit Iran. There are spiritual, communal and ideological links to Iran. All Jews, Christians and Muslims have a link to Jerusalem, a city they all care about. Catholics have a link to Rome, Italy; Protestants have a link to Bern, Switzerland; and Anglicans have a link to Canterbury, England, UK. As a Muslim, I have a link to what is now Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Iran, among others. The Shia have several spiritual links to locations and communities around the world. This is not and has never been a crime. The issue is that there is a concerted effort to paint my father as a point man on Iran's foreign policy at all costs.

**One of your father's brothers, Sheikh Mohammed Yakoob, once said your father was lured to become a Shiite by Iran with money, how would you react to that?**

His name is Mallam Sani Yakubu and he is my father's half-brother. I am actually not at all surprised, as he has a history of being exploited to make such allegations. However, since he is my uncle, I would rather refrain from exposing him to ridicule. My father still has four other brothers and four sisters; any of them will be better suited to talk about him.

**Who has been taking care of your welfare and the welfare of your brothers and sisters since your parents have been in detention?**

There are currently only three out of nine children that have survived the massacres. I started work as soon as I returned to Nigeria in 2012 and have never needed to be taken care of. My sister, who is two years younger than me, is a medical doctor and has worked in two countries. The only one not working is our younger sister, who is pursuing her university studies.

**If you could meet the President, Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) today, what would be your request?**

At this point, I'm not sure if there is anything that can be said. You need to understand that the current President came to power due to the goodwill and immense efforts of a huge united section of Nigeria's population in an unprecedented example of people exercising their constitutional franchise. However, from the beginning of his first term as President, he has brought nothing but disappointment, poverty, destruction and death upon the very people who gave him his seat. The states with the worst cases of mounting poverty, insecurity and now hunger, happen to be the states where he won the most votes.

All his campaign promises back in 2015 happen to be the first ones he broke. This catastrophic betrayal has only got worse after his controversial victory in the 2019 election for his second term. Things have got so bad that even those who vehemently opposed the re-election of Goodluck Jonathan with the slogan of 'change' have since either regretted their roles or at the very least, fallen silent.

**Is your father ready to compromise to secure his release if given some conditions?**

If you are speaking about my father, the question I'm sure he would ask is 'what conditions?' My father has broken no laws in the Nigerian constitution, and freedom of speech and association are rights he possesses as a citizen of this country; the right to life and own properties are also guaranteed.

**Why do you think the Nigerian government really arrested your father and has been unwilling to release him?**

I cannot say, and I prefer not to speculate; this is a question that should best be directed at Buhari himself.

**Some Nigerians ask – why is IMN unwilling to recognise a constitutional government?**

This is one of the most absurd narratives that have been repeatedly pushed by this government and its more cautious mouthpieces. The narrative is so completely absurd that I'm always at a loss as to how to respond to it. We are victims of a massacre by the Nigerian Army. It is utterly absurd to insinuate such grandiose claims as refusal to recognise constitutional government to those who have only ever used constitutional means to address the most unthinkable violations of human rights.

An arm of a 'constitutional' government committed a crime in violation of the constitution; we took our pain and sorrow to the constitutionally sanctioned judiciary of Nigeria. That constitutionally sanctioned judiciary has time and again declared the actions of Buhari's administration and his heavily armed forces as unconstitutional.

Buhari has refused to obey the judiciary at will. The rule of law, which is a key part of the social contract that is the basis of Nigeria, is openly being violated by an administration that controls the army, police, DSS and numerous other armed bodies that threaten, intimidate, kidnap and murder Nigerians at will.

Buhari, his inner circle and all those involved in his administration are the ones who do not recognise a constitutional government. Those involved in the Zaria massacre and the massive cover-up of the crime committed by the army are the ones who show absolutely no respect for the Constitution of Nigeria. In spite of its many amendments, the regime of Buhari seems determined to tear the Constitution of Nigeria and replace it with a codified version of the kind of Nigeria we live in today.

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