

It was on a day yesterday 12 September in 1996, when perhaps the seed of brazen abuse of rights of Sheikh Zakzaky and other members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria was again clearly demonstrated by the brutal might of state apparatus.

On that day, in the early hours of the day, well armed security forces, using the cover of darkness of early dawn, several trucks and armoured personnel carriers had laid a siege of Sheikh Zakzaky's house, then situated in Kwarbai quarters of Zaria city, just behind the Emir's palace. Their main mission was to pick Sheikh Zakzaky on the direct orders of the maximum dictator, Gen Sani Abacha, dead or alive.

Abacha was basking on his brutal potentiality at the time. He had maximally descended on Abiola, NADECO and all other June 12 agitators, who were either killed, captured and detained or made to flee into exile. Just a few weeks earlier, he had killed the popular Ken Saro-wiwa, the Niger Delta and Ogoni front line environmentalist and anti-pollution activist along with his supporters, against international outcry. All known and perceived opposition was cowed. It only remained Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky and his Islamic Movement.

When the unsuspecting members of the Movement assembled for the early morning prayers as was the practice in the Sheikh's residence, they met battle ready security men, who would not do anything besides what they were instructed from Aso rock to do – pick Sheikh Zakzaky dead or alive.

Sheikh Zakzaky addressed his supporters present at the time. He told them he was going to follow the security forces to wherever they wish to take him to. He pointed out that it was not the first time he would be arrested and certainly it was not going to be the last. He mentioned that he knew his detention was not going to last too long. He cautioned that he didn't want any member to attempt to follow him but said that he would like that all activities the Movement undertakes be continued. He chose Sheikh Muhammad Mahmud Turi and his blood brother, Malam Badamasi Yakub to escort him.

That was how he was taken into detention that lasted twenty seven months.

At first, it was not clear what the reasons were that made the government come after the Sheikh. That gave room for the rumour mill, oiled specifically by the security outfit at the time. One early such rumour was that the arrest had to do with probably a publication in the extremely popular Hausa newspaper, *Almizan*. What made this seemed the most probable at the time was the way the MD of the newspaper, Alhaji Hameed Danlami and two other workers of the newspaper were simultaneously arrested. While the siege of Sheikh Zakzaky's house lasted, there was a similar and simultaneous siege on Alhaji Danlami's residence.

The natural thing was to assume perhaps the arrest had something to do with the publication. However, that could not be sustained since nobody could pinpoint anywhere in the editions where the government could consider foul.

Therefore, this quickly fizzled out. The next and the most weird of the allegations at the time was that the Movement was operating an illegal FM radio station. It was something the security forces could easily sellout to the masses because at the time, Radio Kudirat was being aired by the opposition group, NADECO.

The government had tried woefully to stop it to no avail. However, people seriously doubted

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that any radio station was being operated by the Islamic Movement. Nobody could say he ever heard it. This also quickly fizzled out too. The government had to look for some other reasons to give for the arrests.

In the meantime, as the news of the arrest of Sheikh Zakzaky filtered through, there were spontaneous protests across all major towns and villages particularly in the North, but also in certain parts of the south, Lagos and Enugu inclusive. The same protests also held in London and other foreign countries condemning the arrest and calling for the immediate release of the cleric. While all protests ended peacefully everywhere else, in Zaria the protest was attacked by combined forces of Police and soldiers leading to the death of eleven members of the Movement instantly.

Many others were maimed for life. Another grand protest took place in Kaduna some six days later. That too was brutally quelled, leading to the further deaths of several members. A mass grave had to be dug by authorities to bury so many of those killed.

What followed was spates of mass arrests and detention of anyone suspected of being even a sympathizer of the Movement. At some time, Sheikh's wife and children were attacked and arrested.

That was how the brutality continued unabated. Soon, due to a massive #FreeZakzaky Campaign mounted nationally and internationally, there was so much pressure on the government to release Sheikh Zakzaky. Up till that time, the government could not state exactly why the Sheikh was arrested. He was taken to Port Harcourt prison, but there were no specific charges. Several hundreds of others arrested were similarly distributed in all prisons across the country, mainly without charges. In fact, there was no prison in the country that didn't house members of the Movement. The more brutal the regime tried to clampdown on the Movement, the more the international and national outcry became.

The government had no option but to frame charges against the Sheikh and put him on some sort of trial. This they did when they couldn't further take more pressures. He was transferred to Kaduna Prison along with those arrested with him. The charge when it came was rather ridiculous. That his offence was that he said, "there is no authority except that of Allah." This they claim is sedition. The trial commenced at the Federal High Court Kaduna.

However, before long, it was clear that the government was not interested in the trial. They only wanted respite from the mounting pressure. The case was severally stalled, characterized by frequent change of prosecutors and judges as well as prolonged adjournments. The #FreeZakzaky campaigns intensified. Then, all of a sudden, the maximum dictator died in his hideout on Aso Rock. The new government was further pressured to release Sheikh and all those being detained.

The UN had appointed a Human Rights rapporteur to Nigeria, who visited Sheikh Zakzaky in detention. Massive campaigns continued until one day, the judge trying the case, who had been transferred to one of the southern states to stall the Zakzaky case was called back to Kaduna. At that emergency sitting of the court, the prosecution withdrew their charges, and the court dismissed the case and set Sheikh Zakzaky free after a total of twenty seven months.