



## **Hardwired Networks in Northern Nigeria:** Navigating root causes of conflict and advocating for equality across religious, sectarian, and ethnic lines

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*Every person deserves the freedom of thought, conscience,  
religion or belief ... it's how we are **hardwired**.*

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**Nigeria stands at a critical juncture, both politically and socially, and its trajectory in the coming years will ultimately determine its role on the African continent.**

By 2050, Nigeria is poised to become the third most populous country in the world<sup>1</sup>. Nigeria is nearly evenly split between Muslims and Christians, and is in a unique position to model pluralism for other countries in the region. However, ongoing conflict across religious, sectarian and ethnic lines threaten the fraying social fabric of the country.

Tensions continue to escalate between Nigeria's Shi'a Muslim minority and the Sunni majority establishment following the arrest and detention of Sheikh Ibrahim el-Zakzaky, leader of the Shi'a Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). Supporters of the movement do not recognize the authority of the Nigerian government, and have called for the overthrow of the current establishment in favor of a Shi'a republic. Since 2015, clashes between members of IMN and Nigerian Security Forces have resulted in the deaths of as many as 400 members of IMN and several security officers<sup>2</sup>.

Clashes between Muslim herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in the middle belt region of the country have escalated in recent years and increased tensions between Muslim and Christian communities. In June 2018, more than 200 people were killed in Plateau State, leading Nigerian lawmakers to urge President Muhammadu Buhari to resolve the longstanding conflict<sup>3</sup>.

The northeastern region of Nigeria is a hotbed for radicalization and violent extremism which threatens regional security. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) cells are active in the country<sup>4</sup>. Boko Haram, an Islamic militant group, has launch terrorist operations in northern Nigeria since 2009. The group gained international attention in April 2014 by kidnapping more than 200 Chibok schoolgirls from Borno State<sup>5</sup>. The terrorist group has killed more than 20,000 and displaced more than 2 million Nigerians<sup>6</sup>.

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1. "World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision." UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 21 June 2017.

2. [Council on Foreign Relations](#). 15 August 2019.

3. "[More than 200 people killed in weekend violence in central Nigeria](#)." Reuters. 27 June 2018.

4. "[Profile: Al-Qaeda in North Africa](#)." BBC News. 17 January 2013.

5. "[Nigeria Chibok abductions: What we know](#)." BBC News. 8 May 2017.

6. "[Nigeria's Boko Haram attacks in numbers](#)." BBC News. 25 January 2018.

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Moreover, Nigerians remain distrusting of their own government, which often overlooks violations to freedom of religion or belief, or excuses these violations as political, ethnic, or tribal disputes. Communal violence and social hostilities between majority Muslim and Christian or other indigenous and minority communities are pervasive throughout the region, and limited efforts by government officials at the local, state and national levels has fostered a climate of impunity in which attacks are unpunished or excused.

**It is in this context that Hardwired established a training program to equip a diverse network of legal experts and advocates across northern Nigeria to address significant challenges to equality and security.** To do so, we sought to: (1) understand the most significant challenges to marginalized and minority communities across the north, (2) train legal experts and advocates from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds to successfully advocate for the right to freedom of religion or belief (FORB) in law and society, and (3) establish a network of leaders across northern Nigeria — including 19 states and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory — to promote greater respect for freedom of religion or belief and associated rights in their communities through education and other initiatives.

## Freedom of Religion or Belief and Nigerian Law

Nigeria's Constitution includes important provisions to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and associated rights for its citizens, including:

- The right to be free from a religion imposed by the government (Article 10)
- The right to be free from discrimination on the basis of religion (Article 15)
- The right to freedom of conscience, to profess, practice, and propagate one's religion (Article 38)
- The right to manage the internal affairs of one's religion (Article 38)
- The right to own or administer property (Articles 43 and 44)
- The right to establish religious institutions, including for education (Article 38)
- The right to be excused from religious instruction in public schools (Article 38)

Under Nigeria's federal system, each state is responsible for enacting laws and policies relating to freedom of religion or belief. While the Nigerian Constitution states no law shall contradict the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Constitution, this is not strictly enforced. Officials across the north seldom ensure these rights are protected in state or local laws. Moreover, laws and policies can discriminate against or disproportionately affect minority communities. For example, the establishment of criminal sharia law in 12 northern states — including Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger, Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Jigwawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Borno, Zamfara, and Gombe — has fueled ongoing conflict and further marginalized Christian and other religious minority communities in these states.

Discrimination against marginalized communities in law fuels ongoing social hostilities between religious and indigenous communities across the north. Moreover, the failure of officials at the local, state and federal levels to ensure justice for victims of discrimination or other violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief creates a climate of impunity in which perpetrators of violence remain unpunished and victims never receive justice or protection.

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## Identifying Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief and Associated Rights in Nigeria

Hardwired has worked with legal and civil society networks to identify the following violation trends across northern Nigeria:

### *Discrimination and Unequal Treatment on the Basis of Religion*

While Article 15 of the Nigerian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, it is entrenched in the legal and social framework of society. Lawyers reported numerous cases of discrimination and unequal treatment on the basis of religion by community leaders, law enforcement officials, business owners, employers, school administrators, and neighbors or family members. Examples of discrimination and unequal treatment include:

- Police refuse to investigate the complaints of a victim of an attack from a minority community because the accused is a member of the majority community.
- A student is denied admittance to a university because of his or her religion.
- Local administrators do not build schools or community resource centers in minority neighborhoods.

States may have laws and policies that directly or indirectly discriminate against persons, including laws and policies which appear to be neutral but cause a disproportionately negative impact on the minority communities. States have an obligation to ensure the equal ability of men and women to secure all of their human rights.

### *Coercion, Forced Conversion and Enforcement of a Religion*

While Article 10 of the Nigerian Constitution prohibits coercion and the enforcement of a particular religion, 12 state governments — Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger, Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Jigwawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Borno, Zamfara, and Gombe — have adopted criminal sharia law, which in effect established a de facto official religion by creating a system of law and punishment based on one religion. The enforcement of laws that prohibit “un-Islamic” activities as defined by authorities inhibits the free exercise of religion for

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both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The broad application of sharia law to non-Muslims through sharia courts infringes on the rights of non-Muslims. This is cause for concern in cases involving personal status law — including inheritance, marriage, and child custody issues involving Muslim and non-Muslim parties — in which favor is disproportionately shown to the Muslim party. It is important to note that a case involving a non-Muslim party cannot be brought before a sharia court without the formal written consent of the non-Muslim party.

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Community leaders have reported frequent cases of coercion of minority communities to act in a way that is inconsistent with their beliefs. One issue of particular concern is the kidnapping, forced conversion, and forced marriage of non-Muslim female minors to Muslim men. These cases constitute violations of religious freedom as well as parental consent laws relating to marriage. Additional examples of discrimination and unequal treatment include:

- The religious police (hisbah) target and harass community members (including Muslims and non-Muslims alike) who are not adhering to their interpretation of social propriety as defined by sharia law and customs.
- An employer refuses to consider a candidate for a job unless they change their name to a name reflecting a specific religion.
- A group kidnaps civilians to inspire fear in their community to change their religion.

### *Restricting Assembly or Association and Restrictions or Attacks on Religious Property*

The Nigerian Supreme Court has broadly defined the term “property” as used in the Nigerian Constitution to include churches and places of worship, and different types of buildings or land that are important to religious communities such as cemeteries, monasteries, or community headquarters. “Property” includes not only physical objects, but symbols, offices and religious duties. Each of these types of property are necessary to manifest religious beliefs and to gather in community with other believers, and attacks on religious property violate the right of the individual and of the group of individuals forming the religious community. Community leaders have reported attacks to the property of minority communities across the north, as well as efforts by local authorities to inhibit religious communities’ ability to assemble and practice their faith. Examples of restrictions or violations of these rights include:

- Authorities refuse to issue permits to build a church in a community.
- Police enter a religious gathering during a time of prayer and shut down the service.
- A mob destroys the fence of a place of worship as a means of protest against their activities and teachings.
- Government zoning laws are disproportionately applied to minority communities to prevent them from building places of worship and other religious buildings.
- State-level government approves the use of bulldozers and members of the community to tear down the radio station of a minority group.
- Government officials require a group to abandon their land and the buildings developed on the property without paying the group compensation for the property.

### *Communal Violence Against Minority Communities*

Minority communities are often targeted for communal violence and attacks. Community-led attacks often occur in response to an incident in which the victim or victims expressed beliefs which were contrary to the beliefs of the perpetrators of the attack. These incidents are not frequently reported because victims fear retaliatory attacks. When attacks are reported to local officials, local authorities seldom pursue justice for victims. In these cases, officials indirectly encourage or condone violations

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of the victim's rights and promote a climate of impunity in which perpetrators of violence face no consequence for their actions. Examples of communal violence and attacks include:

- A man is attacked on the street while evangelizing or talking about her religion to members of her community.
- A woman is attacked by members of her community because she is wearing a religious symbol or religious clothing.
- A minority community is targeted for an attack by Fulani Herdsmen.

Attacks by militant groups on specific communities also constitute communal violence. Boko Haram has sought to significantly restrict the exercise of religious freedom for non-Muslims and Muslims alike through coordinated attacks on villages throughout northeastern Nigeria. In addition to violent attacks on villages, Boko Haram also infringes on religious freedom rights through the forced conversion of Christians, applying sharia law and hudood punishments, and requiring Muslims to adhere to their strict interpretation of Islam.

### *Restrictions on the Right to Religious Education*

Education plays a central role in the lives of children because teachers and classmates have a significant influence on their development. Recognizing this influence, Article 30(1) and other provisions in the Nigerian Constitution protect the educational rights of minorities. Violations of freedom of religion or belief occur when a parent is prevented from teaching their child about their religion, when their child is forced to receive instruction in religion, or when restrictions are placed on the ability to maintain and operate religious schools. Examples of violations of or restrictions on the right to religious education in northern Nigeria include:

- State-level governments hiring teachers based on their religion and discriminating against teachers from minority communities who are seeking employment.
- A school implements a curriculum that favors the religion of the majority community and requires the study of that religion for all students, regardless of their personal religious affiliation or beliefs.

## **Understanding the Underlying Causes of Conflict**

**Hardwired's approach to resolving or mitigating religion-related conflict is grounded in our work across more than 30 countries around the world.** We recognize that understanding the root causes of conflict — the fears, misconceptions and biases held by those involved — is integral to long-term resolution. To this end, an assessment of the underlying causes of conflict in northern Nigeria is essential for any successful peacebuilding effort. Working in collaboration with lawyers and advocates across northern Nigeria, we identified the following broad motivations or causes of conflict:

### *North-South Regional Tensions and Fear of Losing Power or Authority*

The divide between northern and southern Nigeria is historically grounded in political, ethnic, religious, and economic issues. Traditionally, the south has been viewed more powerful politically and

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economically, and distrust of the south among northern Nigerians remains widespread. Northern Nigerians have feared domination by the south and viewed the growth of communities typically associated with southern states — most notably Christians — as a threat to their own vitality. Consequently, legal and social hostilities are used in northern States to mitigate the growth of non-Muslim communities which they perceive to be a threat. For example, the adoption of sharia law in 12 northern states is undoubtedly an example of government authorities seeking to ascribe and affirm a Muslim identity to the north.

Distrust of non-Muslim communities, including Christians and other indigenous religious communities, across the north fuels discrimination and hostilities toward non-Muslim minority groups. In these cases, non-Muslims may be discriminated against in education, employment, or appointments to government or other official positions because they are perceived as a threat to northern solidarity and development. Preferential treatment may be given to members of the majority faith to ensure power and authority in the region remains in the hands of the majority rather than the threatening growing minority community.

Fear of losing power or authority also compels members of the majority community to resort to communal violence and physical attacks on members of minority communities in order to impose a climate of fear. Moreover, they may attempt to impose their beliefs on others through forced conversion or coercion in order to solicit greater support for northern solidarity. This climate of fear is reinforced when authorities fail to prosecute perpetrators of violence and ensure justice for victims.

### *Ignorance or Lack of Education*

Widespread ignorance of the right to freedom of religion or belief, as well as what constitutes a violation of this right according to international and constitutional law, fuels government restrictions and social hostilities. Legal experts and advocates report the majority of people in their communities are unaware of their rights or how to address violations. Consequently, we found that many challenges could be addressed by thinking critically and strategically about potential threats or vulnerabilities. Similarly, perpetrators of violations may not understand how or why their actions threaten or restrict the rights of others.

### *Misunderstanding of “Cross-Cutting” Issues*

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges to justice for victims of religious freedom violations is the climate of impunity in which these attacks occur. This is caused in large part by officials who fail to recognize or acknowledge violations of freedom of religion or belief and instead excuse them as hostilities fueled by ethnic, tribal or political disputes. In some cases, there may be more than one issue motivating an attack or social aggression, and more than one right may be violated. Similarly, communal violence — including the destruction of property, cattle raiding or other attacks — may fall along religious lines. In an environment with systemic social hostilities and tension between religious communities, officials may fear how members of the community will respond if they acknowl-

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edge a violation on the basis of religion. Rather than risk backlash from members of the community, they may elect to dismiss a claim as a different type of dispute — political, tribal, ethnic or otherwise.

For example, ongoing clashes between Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers were described by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as having “religious undertones”.<sup>7</sup> While these conflicts are not explicitly caused by religious tensions or disagreements, reports suggest herdsman disproportionately target Christian communities and villages for attacks. However, the Nigerian Government remains slow to address the escalating conflict between herdsman and farmers.

## Hardwired’s Approach: Establishing Networks of Influence Across the Region

Since 2017, Hardwired has worked with leaders from key sectors of civil society across northern Nigeria to develop diverse networks of advocates that can promote greater respect for the rights of all Nigerians. From 2017-2018, Hardwired trained a cadre of 30 religious and indigenous community leaders to:

- (1) understand and articulate their rights,
- (2) host trainings in their communities to educate others about their rights,
- (3) report on violations of religious freedom and discrimination, and
- (4) increase dialogue about religious freedom and protection for their rights.

Within one year, the network of leaders trained more than 1,000 members of their communities across 19 northern states and Abuja FCT. Many reported it was the first time members of their communities learned about their rights.

From 2018-2020, Hardwired is working with a religiously and ethnically diverse cohort of 40 lawyers across 19 northern states and Abuja FCT to develop a network of legal advocates who:

- (1) educate others about their rights through community trainings and initiatives,
- (2) provide legal counsel to members of their communities who experienced violations to their rights,
- (3) develop legal strategies to address problematic laws and policies within their states, and
- (4) collaborate on broader efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental right for all Nigerians.

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7. “Nigeria.” US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2017 Report. USCIRF.

In addition to trainings, Hardwired produced a comprehensive legal guidebook on freedom of religion or belief and associated rights in Nigeria. The resource — the first of its kind in the country — includes: a comprehensive overview of the human right to freedom of religion or belief, specific provisions for these rights in the Nigerian constitution, analysis of common violations in Nigeria, and instructions for reporting violations and seeking legal recourse.

## Ensuring Equality and Security in Africa's Largest Democracy

As Nigeria ascends to greater influence across the African continent, we believe the findings and lessons learned through Hardwired's programs can support the country's leadership in the region. Through the organization's civil society and legal programs, leaders across various sectors of civil society have established networks and are able to train others, work in collaboration with one another, and mobilize broader efforts to address challenges to their rights through education and advocacy initiatives.

The development and growth of these networks illustrates the impact of our programs among communities that typically feel disempowered or oppressed. Moreover, these leaders are not only defending the rights and freedoms of their own communities; they are working across religious, sectarian and ethnic lines to counter an entrenched sense of victimization and helplessness shared by all marginalized or minority communities.

Moreover, we recognize further progress will be made as representatives of all religious, sectarian and ethnic communities work together across religious lines to promote a shared value of respect for the human dignity and freedoms of all Nigerians. To this end, Hardwired offers the following recommendations as a path forward for freedom of religion or belief and broader security in Nigeria:

- The development and distribution of community-based education resources to teach Nigerians about their rights and the value of freedom of religion or belief in building peaceful, pluralistic societies
- Training for legal experts and advocates to file cases and ensure justice for victims of discrimination and other violations
- Training and resource development for educators to promote greater respect for diversity and equality across Nigerian society among youth
- Investment in the training of civil society leaders to promote human dignity and equality in their respective spheres of influence
- Collaboration and strategic planning among advocacy and justice groups and government officials to ensure violations are reported and members of minority communities receive equal treatment at the local, state, and federal levels

## About Hardwired

Hardwired Global is a non-governmental organization with Special Consultative Status at the United Nations that works to promote respect for the dignity and freedom of all people through education. We have experience working with diverse communities in more than 30 countries, and the impact of our work has been presented to leaders in the UN, EU, Council of Europe, OSCE, African Union, and the U.S. Congress.

## Author Bio

Lena Abboud is the Director of International Programs for Hardwired Global, a non-governmental organization that provides human rights education and training to leaders in the fields of government, education, law, media, civil society and religious leadership around the world. Prior to her work with Hardwired Global, Mrs. Abboud served as a policy advisor in the United States Congress and coordinator of the bi-partisan International Religious Freedom Caucus, effectively advising and supporting the efforts of more than 60 Members of Congress on issues related to freedom of religion or belief and human rights within U.S. foreign policy. Mrs. Abboud has traveled to more than 25 countries on official delegations and fact-finding missions to meet with government officials, civil society groups, and religious and ethnic communities about various issues relating to freedom of religion or belief, human rights and governance. Mrs. Abboud received her Master's of Public Diplomacy from the University Southern of California.