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NIGERIA: COURT BANS SHIA GROUP

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(Abuja) – A Nigerian court ruled on July 26, 2019 that activities of the Shia Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) amount to “acts of terrorism and illegality” and ordered the government to ban the religious group, Human Rights Watch said today. Nigeria’s presidency then [announced the ban](#) on July 28.

“The sweeping court ruling against the Shia movement threatens the basic human rights of all Nigerians,” said Anietie Ewang, Nigeria researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The government should seek to reverse the ban, which prohibits the religious group’s members from exercising their right to meet and carry out peaceful activities.”

The IMN is a Shia minority sect with close ties to Iran, operating mostly in northern Nigeria. It began in the 1980s and is led by Sheik Ibrahim El Zakzaky, who was inspired by Iran’s revolutionary movement during his travels there. The sect has an estimated [four million followers](#). It is separate from Boko Haram, an Islamist armed group also operating in northern Nigeria.

The move to ban the group came less than a week after police [violently cracked down](#) on members of the Shia movement in Abuja, the capital, as they protested the Zakzaky’s detention since 2015 and called for the authorities to allow him proper medical care. At least 11 protesters, a journalist, and a police officer were killed, while dozens of other protesters were wounded or arrested.

In its July 26 [ruling](#), the court directed the government to publish the proscription order in the official Gazette and two national dailies. Nigeria’s solicitor general had brought a motion – called an ex parte application – before the court, seeking to have the group declared a terrorist organization and banned. The group’s representatives were not given an opportunity to participate in the hearing, as such an application is intended for emergency proceedings that do not require the opposing party to respond or be present.

In announcing the ban on the movement, the presidency [stated](#) that the government had “outlawed the criminality of the group,” which has engaged in terrorist activities, “including attacking soldiers, killing policemen and a youth corps member, destroying public property, consistently defying State authority.” The [statement](#) further specified that the ban was not against peaceful and law-abiding Shia Muslims in the country who are practicing their religion.

The Nigerian constitution and international human rights law guarantee the rights to freedom of religion, association and expression. Under international law, no restrictions may be placed on these rights unless provided by law, serve a legitimate government purpose in a democratic society, and are necessary for attaining that purpose.

“Allegations of criminality do not present legitimate grounds to ban the activities of a religious group, including protests for justice and the release of their leader,” Ewang said. “The ban on the Shia movement may portend an even worse security force crackdown on the group, which could have dire human rights implications throughout Nigeria.”