

# Freedom of Religion and Belief .. Between Governments Strictness and Religious Extremism

Case studies: Nigeria, Eritrea and Somalia

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## **Freedom of Religion and Belief between Governments' Strictness and Religious Extremism, with Nigeria, Eritrea and Somalia as Case Studies**

### **Preamble**

Freedom of religion or belief is one of the rights interrelated with freedom of opinion and expression. There is no doubt that crimes based on belief and religion are a major cause of backwardness, barbarism and barbaric massacres, especially in the African continent. In general, human history is full of bloody incidents based on religion, belief and various religious sects. Every sect, every sect, and every religion believe that they are the most worthy to follow, but in fact all of them are fallacies that are not based on any scientific facts.

On the occasion of International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, and in the context of the huge interest in consolidating and strengthening the principles of freedom of opinion and belief, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights presents a study entitled “**Freedom of Religion and Belief between Governments' Strictness and Religious Extremism, with Nigeria, Eritrea and Somalia as Case Studies**”. The study reviews the reality of freedom of religion and belief in the countries under study, whether from the legislative and legal framework or the actual reality, and monitors the most prominent violations committed in this regard. It also touched upon the efforts made to protect minorities from religion-based violence, and concludes with a set of recommendations to stakeholders as part of the solution and as an attempt to protect victims of religious and ideological violence.

### **Religious and ideological-based violence in Nigeria, Somalia and Eritrea.. Motives & Incidents**

Unfortunately, there are many factors that fuel violence, extremism and terrorism in Africa such as misconceptions of religion, the growing rates of poverty and unemployment that encourages armed groups to recruit young people, and also chaos and political instability that represent fertile ground for the growth and spread of these extremist groups in Africa.



## **First: Religious Extremism and Violent Practices... A Case Study of Boko Haram in Nigeria**

Nigeria suffers from the presence of the extremist Boko Haram group, which is the main cause behind all crimes of religious-based violence and persecution of religious minorities. This section presents the reality of freedom of religion and belief in Nigeria, and explains the constitutional and legislative frameworks and state policies followed to counter the spread of terrorism as well as the human rights violations committed by Boko terrorist groups, in addition to the forms of religious persecution that are carried out by the state itself.

## **Second: Religious Objectives and Violence in East Africa... The Mujahidin Youth Movement (MYM) as a Case Study**

Al-Shabaab extremist movement is active in southern and central Somalia. Therefore, minorities in the areas under their control live in constant persecution under the name of the application of Islamic law and the preservation of religious beliefs in the face of the practices of the Western federal government.

## **Third: Religion-Based Violence... Wholesale Violations by the Eritrean Government**

Unlike the previous countries under study, all forms of violence that restrict religious freedom in Eritrea are practiced by the state. The state seeks more bloodshed, which ignites the flames of revenge among the victims, so that violence continues between the two parties, revolving in a vicious circle. However, the Eritrean people suffer from persecution and repression of religious freedom as a result of the state's practices.

The government recognizes only four religious denominations: Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic and Sunni Islam, and followers of unrecognized religions are prohibited from practicing their religion and are systematically arrested and detained

## **Efforts To Achieve Religious Freedom and Protect Minorities**

The efforts made, whether by the international community or by continental entities and bodies, in order to achieve one goal, which is to reject the culture of violence and religious extremism, work to consolidate the principles of difference, respect of religious freedom, enhance the status of religious minorities, and work to protect basic rights. In the next part, the study attempts to present the most prominent efforts made in this regard focusing on the African Union as the most important continental entity in Africa and the United Nations.

### **Did victims of religion-based violence obtain their rights as a religious minority?**

It has not been proven to this day in the countries reviewed in the study that they held criminals responsible for religion-based crimes accountable. Nigeria and Somalia, which have extremist groups, cannot fully control these groups or even know the perpetrators of violent crimes. When some of the fighters of those groups are arrested, they are thrown into prisons without fair trials, and are punished for affiliation with those terrorist organizations. Therefore, citizens, especially persecuted minorities, do not feel that they have the right to sue the individuals responsible for these violent crimes.

Therefore, the UN General Assembly and the African Union, when developing their plans to defeat religion-based violence in the aforementioned countries, must include providing help as well as psychological and social rehabilitation to those affected by violence and religious minorities.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

There is no doubt that the youth are the winning horse in this issue of violence and extremism; they are the means of demolition used in these terrorist operations against innocent civilians, and they are also the fuel for civilization, construction, spreading peace and promoting dialogue. Therefore, the real battle in the war to eliminate violence based on religion or belief is to win the nation's youth into the ranks of enlightened people calling for dialogue and peace, and this is what lacks the efforts made by countries that suffer from violence and terrorism. As we mentioned earlier, such as Nigeria and Somalia, these countries lack the plans to end violence that they adopt towards young people, as they only pay attention to military and financial efforts,

ignoring the most important factor for the success of those plans, which is the human factor.

Groups that adopt and spread violence against innocents are created with little equipment and a large manpower, with young people who are convinced of its principles and imbued with its orders, so these groups are able to spread and carry out their operations.

Therefore, if we really want to see a world that enjoys peace and freedom of religion and belief, in which minorities are not oppressed, we must work on spreading awareness of the heavenly religions that prohibit bloodshed, renounce violence and call for peace among youth.

## **Recommendations**

Therefore, at the conclusion of this study, and after the serious causes and effects of violence and terrorism that have been clarified, Maat makes these recommendations in order to eliminate violence based on religion and protect minorities:

- a. African countries suffering from the spread of religion-based violence, such as terrorist groups and other extremist practices, must find just and equitable mechanisms that guarantee equal opportunities for work and a decent life, and work to spread the correct religious culture that is characterized by moderation and non-extremism.
- b. Maat recommends more cooperation with Sunni Muslim scholars in countries where a culture of religious violence is spreading, in order to correct the misconceptions of the erroneous belief that these groups deceive their suppliers, such as the doctrine of jihad for the sake of God, and work to spread the culture of rejecting torture and denying its practice, whether at the state or individual level.
- c. The Eritrean government should criminalize all forms of violence and religious discrimination in detailed legislation so that the perpetrator of the violent crime is punished directly to prevent circumvention of the law.

d. The need to put in place elaborate mechanisms in order to stimulate youth participation in community work, prevent the recruitment of these young people into the ranks of armed fighters, and make more efforts to improve the standard of living of those at the age of polarization, so that poverty does not become a pretext for their affiliation with these extremist groups.

e. Maat calls on the governments of countries that suffer from the spread of the phenomenon of terrorism and its concentration on their lands, to guide the media discourse and prevent the discourse directed at reducing religious minorities, but on the contrary, it always addresses their issues that they are part of the same society and enhance their participation in it

f. Expedite the development of a national plan within the state of its citizens, and all groups and institutions participate in its implementation in order to reject extremist ideology and support it and to renounce groups that shed the blood of one people in retaliation for the victims of religious discrimination.