

## Religious Leaders and COVID-19 Guidelines Enforcement in Rural Communities of Nigeria: A Study of Selected Mosques in Ijebu North-East Area

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### Abstract

The global response to the outbreak of novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, and its rapid spread to over 200 countries/territories has been intense. Following the discovery of its index case on 27 February 2020 in Lagos, Nigeria, various measures were adopted at the federal, state and local levels to contain its spread. The enforcement of COVID-19 Guidelines/Protocols commenced on 30 March 2020 in the affected states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Thus, it is acknowledged that religious institutions and their leaders are crucial stakeholders in implementing these guidelines. This study used a qualitative research design to examine how religious leaders in Ijebu North-East Local Government Area responded to the enforcement of COVID-19 guidelines during total and relaxed lockdowns. It reveals that prominent Imāms at their respective mosques during the total lockdown suspended daily *Salāmāt*, Fridays congregational prayers (*As-Salāt al-Jumu'at*), daily *Ramadhān Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, *Iftārus-Sawm*, *Tarāwih* and *Tabajjud*, and celebration of *Īd-el-Fitri*, *Īd-el-Adhā* and *Mawlud-en-Nabiyy*. They offered their host communities spiritual and socio-welfare support in addition to disseminating information on COVID-19 prevention methods. During the relaxed lockdown, the NCDC's COVID-19 Guidelines for Re-Opening Places of Worship were strictly followed. Inadequate resources, the lack of belief in the existence of COVID-19, un-Islamic traits of some wealthy Muslims, and a sense of distrust among some followers were identified challenges. The study concludes by suggesting how mosque leaders can proactively assist governments in eradicating coronavirus and related diseases.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic; Guidelines Enforcement; Lockdown; Mosque Leader; Religious Institution

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## Introduction

One of the deadliest health crises to have negatively impacted nations around the world, the novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), has caused significant disruptions in political, economic, and socio-religious life<sup>1</sup>. Due to its severity by the early 2020s and the frightening rates of expansion from Wuhan, Hubei Province in the People's Republic of China to other nations, COVID-19 was designated a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Health Regulations and Emergency Committee (EC) on 30 January 2020<sup>2</sup>, and declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020<sup>3</sup>. The horrific death toll brought on by the virus saw more than 6.2 million deaths recorded between 11 January 2020 and 8 May 2022, with more than 517 million people affected globally<sup>4</sup>. From a total of 11,725,027 confirmed cases, 25,107 deaths were reported throughout Africa.<sup>5</sup>

In Nigeria, the index case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Lagos State by Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) on 27 February 2020, after an Italian national, who flew into the country, was tested positive<sup>6</sup>. The second case was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, on 9 March 2020<sup>7</sup>. There were

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<sup>1</sup> Sambu Alice, Kweingoti Reuben, Cherotich M. Gabriel, & Abdalla H. Salimin. "Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Religious Activities and Faith of Worshippers in Kenya: A Case Study of Narok Town, Kenya." *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, vol. 20, 1–18 (2021); Bimbo Stanley Omopo. "Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Practices and Religious Conviviality in Ibadan: The Place of Religious Leaders in Maintaining Close-Knit Religious Communities." *Research Report/IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series 82*, IFRA-Nigeria. pp.1–26. (2021); Aldona Maria Piwko. "Islam and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Between Religious Practice and Health Protection." *Journal of Religion and Health* vol. 60 no. 5, 3291–3308. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01346-y> (2021); Abdullah Salim, Norzarina Md Yatim, Siti Zainab Ibrahim, Muhamad Razak Idris, Baktiar Hasnan, & Masitah Esa. "The impact of Pandemic COVID-19 on the Activism, Financial and Digital Wellbeing of Mosque Institution." *Proceeding of the 3rd ICDIS 2021 "Islam and Southeast Asian Communities Welfare in the COVID-19 Era"*, vol. 2 no. 1, 185–204. (2021)

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). "COVID 19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) Global Research and Innovation Forum: Towards a Research Roadmap." 12 February. [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/COVID-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-\(pheic\)-global-research-and-innovation-forum](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/COVID-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-(pheic)-global-research-and-innovation-forum) (2020)

<sup>3</sup> WHO. "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-COVID-19---11-march-2020>" (2020)

<sup>4</sup> Worldometer. "Countries where COVID-19 has Spread." 8 May. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread> (2022)

<sup>5</sup> BBC News. "Coronavirus in Africa Tracker." 8 May. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1d1d568-2716-41cf-a15e-7d15079548bc> (2022)

<sup>6</sup> NCDC. "First case of coronavirus disease confirmed in Nigeria." 28 February. <https://ncdc.gov.ng/news/227/first-case-of-corona-virus-disease-confirmed-in-nigeria> (2020)

<sup>7</sup> PM News. "Nigeria records second case of coronavirus." 9 March. <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2020/03/09/breaking-nigeria-records-second-case-of-coronavirus> (2020)

255,766 confirmed cases and 3,143 deaths in 36 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) as of 8 May 2022<sup>8</sup>. Following the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendations, a number of institutional, legal, health, and regulatory measures were put in place to limit its spread and lessen its catastrophic effects. Lockdown is one of these measures.

Beginning on 30 March 2020, the lockdown mechanism was implemented in Lagos, Ogun, and FCT (Abuja) for a two-week trial period<sup>9</sup>. The Federal Government's Lockdown Enforcement Guidelines emphasized, among other things, mandatory stay-at-home (with few exception), immediate closure of mosques, churches, and other religious facilities, and limiting mass gatherings to 20 people based on social distancing rules<sup>10</sup>. The ban on religious gatherings was lifted on 2 June 2020, leading to a limited re-opening of mosques, as outlined in the NCDC's COVID-19 Guidelines for Re-Opening Places of Worship<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the implementation of these guidelines rests essentially on the religious leaders at each different place of worship.

Religious leaders and faith-based communities are recognized as important stakeholders in health promotion initiatives, including disease prevention<sup>12</sup>. In an effort to save lives and reduce health complications, religious institutions, such as mosques, play an important role in facilitating direct healthcare, sharing vital health information, disseminating health prevention education, and offering financial support, comfort, and other socio-welfare services during times of health crisis<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> NCDC. "COVID-19 Nigeria." 8 May. <https://COVID19.ncdc.gov.ng/> (2022)

<sup>9</sup> Fidelis Mbah. "Nigeria announces lockdown of major cities to curb coronavirus." *Aljazeera*, 30 March. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/3/30/nigeria-announces-lockdown-of-major-cities-to-curb-coronavirus> (2020)

<sup>10</sup> The State House (Abuja). "PTF COVID-19 guidance on implementation of lockdown policy." <https://statehouse.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PTF-COVID-19-Guidance-on-implementation-of-lockdown-policy-FINAL.docx-2.pdf&sa> (2020)

<sup>11</sup> NCDC. "COVID-19 Guidelines on Re-Opening of Places of Worship." [https://COVID19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/files/GUIDELINES\\_ON\\_REOPENING\\_OF\\_PLACES\\_OF\\_WORSHIP\\_Final.pdf](https://COVID19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/files/GUIDELINES_ON_REOPENING_OF_PLACES_OF_WORSHIP_Final.pdf) (2020)

<sup>12</sup> WHO. "Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19." *Interim Guidance*, 7 April. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect-practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-COVID-19> (2020); Millawage S. D. Wijesinghe, Vinya S. Ariyaratne, Balangoda M. I. Gunawardana, R. M. Nayani U. Rajapaksha et al. "Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Religion and Health* vol. 61, 687–702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01463-8> (2022); Jumanah Essa-Hadad, Nour Elhadi Shahbari, Daniel Roth, & Anat Gesser-Edelsburg. "The impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel." *Front Public Health* vol. 10, no. 1061072. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1061072> (2022)

<sup>13</sup> Jo Anne Lyon. "A secret weapon in the fight against diseases: faith leaders." *World Economic Forum*, 8 June. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/a-secret-weapon-in-the-fight->

Mosques have since the early days of Islām served as a hub for health promotion programs. They are known for being places where community engagement and participation in health campaigns and implementation can be facilitated and improved.<sup>14</sup> In their communities, mosque administrators and officials are essential in preventing and eradicating sickness<sup>15</sup>. The leadership of mosques has a special responsibility to create environments that can address health disparities among the general populace. Thus, by integrating teachings from the Qur'an and the Prophets, every mosque is a place where health promotion messages are strengthened when an Imām is in charge of overseeing them effectively<sup>16</sup>.

Previous research has shown that Muslim religious leaders are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, notably through promoting social distance policies at their various places of worship and distributing useful information on hygiene, and taking other preventive and curing measures<sup>17</sup>. Nigerian Muslim scholars are acknowledged the bearers of disseminating information concerning the pandemic during the total and eased lockdown<sup>18</sup>. About 500,000 Imāms in Bangladesh during COVID-19 period played critical role in disseminating key public health messages focusing on hygiene and infection prevention, including handwashing using soap, social distancing, and

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[against-diseases-faith-leaders/](#) (2016); WHO. "Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19." (2020).

<sup>14</sup> S. C. Kwon, S. Patel, C. Choy, J. Zaniwak, & C. Rideout, et al. "Implementing health promotion activities using community-engaged approaches in Asian American faith-based organizations in New York City and New Jersey." *TBM* vol. 7, 444–466 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13142-017-0506-0>; Najeeb Rahman. "The Community Opinions on Vaccine Issues and Decisions (COVID) Survey: Using a rapid Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) survey in supporting a Community Engagement Approach to address COVID-19 Vaccine uptake initiatives." <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.04.11.21255260>. (2021)

<sup>15</sup> Yassar Mustafa, Diya Baker, Preeti Puligari & Teresa Melody, et al. "The Role of Imams and Mosques in Health Promotion in Western Societies: A Systematic Review Protocol." *BioMed Central Systematic Reviews* vol. 6 no. 25, 1–5. (2017)

<sup>16</sup> Mohammed Vaqar. "Tackling health inequalities through enhancing the wellbeing role of mosques." *UK Health Security Agency*, 23 August. <https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2017/08/23/tackling-health-inequalities-through-enhancing-the-wellbeing-role-of-mosques/> (2017)

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Mu'ti. "Religious communities join fight against COVID-19." 12 June. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/06/12/religious-communities-join-fight-against-COVID-19.html> (2020); UNICEF. "Religious leaders play key role in battle against COVID-19." 24 May. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/religious-leaders-play-key-role-battle-against-COVID-19> (2020); Jamilat Nasiru. "NSCIA holds sensitization programme on COVID-19 vaccine for Muslim scholars." *TheCable*, 27 January. <https://www.thecable.ng/nsCIA-holds-sensitisation-programme-on-COVID-19-vaccine-for-muslim-scholars/amp> (2021); M. S. D. Wijesinghe et al. "Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka." (2022)

<sup>18</sup> Jamilat Nasiru. "NSCIA holds sensitization programme on COVID-19 vaccine for Muslim scholars." *TheCable*, 27 January. <https://www.thecable.ng/nsCIA-holds-sensitisation-programme-on-COVID-19-vaccine-for-muslim-scholars/amp> (2021)

how to benefit from the lockdown using posters, radio, television, newspapers and mosque megaphones<sup>19</sup>. Through mosque megaphones, millions of individuals were reached, providing vital information to families without access to smartphones or electronic media.

However, the pandemic's occurrences suggest that mosques and other religious institutions were to blame for a spike in disease transmission. For instance, it was revealed that a Tabligh event at Masjid Jamek in Kuala Lumpur's Sri Petaling district was responsible for 48% of the second wave of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia<sup>20</sup>. More than 4,000 coronavirus cases have been linked to the congregation of preachers at Nizamuddin Markaz Mosque in the Delhi region of India<sup>21</sup>. This demonstrates that the mosque turned into a hotspot for COVID-19 transmission, hence adopting protective measures is essential for containing the pandemic in mosques<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that several nations implemented measures that resulted in the prohibition of congregation in mosques, churches, temples, and other places of worship, the consequent closing of all religious institutions, and the subsequent guidelines for the reopening of places of worship.

In light of the foregoing, numerous studies have been undertaken in countries other than Nigeria to unravel the contributions of religious authorities and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in halting the spread of COVID-19. For instance, Phesheya Vilakati et al. studied the "neglected role of faith-based organizations in preventing and controlling COVID-19 in Africa"<sup>23</sup>; Paska Wagana examined the "role of religion in response to COVID-19 pandemic challenges in Tanzania"<sup>24</sup>; Millawage Wijesinghe et al. investigated the role

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF. "Religious leaders play key role in battle against COVID-19." (2020)

<sup>20</sup> *TheSun Daily*. "48% of Nation's COVID-19 Cases linked to Sri Petaling Tabligh Event." 19 May. <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/48-of-nation-s-COVID-19-cases-linked-to-sri-petaling-tabligh-event/> (2020)

<sup>21</sup> Parimal Kumar. "30 percent of Coronavirus Cases Linked to Delhi Mosque Event: Government." *NDTV*, 4 April. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-tablighi-jamaat-30-per-cent-of-coronavirus-cases-linked-to-delhi-mosque-event-government-2206163> (2020)

<sup>22</sup> Choirul Amin, Priyono Priyono, Umrotun Umrotun, Maulida Fatkiyah, & Suliadi F. Sufahani. "Exploring the Prevalence of Protective Measure Adopted in Mosques during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia." *Sustainability* vol. 13 no. 13927, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132413927> (2021)

<sup>23</sup> Phesheya N. Vilakati, Simone Villa, Riccardo Alagna, Bongani Khumalo, & Sarah Tshuma, et al. "The Neglected Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Preventing and Controlling COVID-19 in Africa." *Trans R Soc Trop Med Hyg*; 0: 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/trstmh/traa073> (2020)

<sup>24</sup> Paskas Wagana. "The role of religion in response to COVID-19 pandemic challenges in Tanzania." In Fortune Sibanda, Tenson Muyambo, and Ezra Chitando (Eds.), *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa* (pp. 115–125). London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003241096-8> (2022)



of religious leaders in COVID-19 prevention in Sri Lanka<sup>25</sup>; Kate Vyborny conducted an investigation into the role of religious leaders during COVID-19 in Pakistan<sup>26</sup>; Amin Al-Astewani's research focused on the role of mosque authority in the fight against COVID-19 within the British Muslim community<sup>27</sup>; Choirul Amin et al. explored "the prevalence of protective measure adopted in mosques during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia"<sup>28</sup>; Jamanah Essa-Hadad et al. explored the impact of Muslim and Christian religious leaders' response to COVID-19 in Israel<sup>29</sup>; and Mohamad Nurmansyah et al. investigated the COVID-19 preventive behavioral measures during the re-opening phase of worship places among Indonesian Muslims<sup>30</sup>.

Few scholarly studies in Nigeria concentrate on the responses to religious restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19<sup>31</sup>, the role of religion in this spread<sup>32</sup>, and the impact of COVID-19 on religious practices and social life in Ibadan, and the role of religious leaders in maintaining close-knit religious communities<sup>33</sup>. None of these studies, however, interrogate how the mosque or Muslim leaders in Nigeria, notably in Ijebu North-East of Ogun State, implemented the COVID-19 guidelines. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine how religious

<sup>25</sup> Millawage S. D. Wijesinghe, Vinya S. Ariyaratne, Balangoda M. I. Gunawardana, R. M. Nayani U. Rajapaksha, et al. "Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Religion and Health* 61:687–702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01463-8> (2022)

<sup>26</sup> Kate Vyborny. "Persuasion and Public Health: Evidence from an Experiment with Religious Leaders during COVID-19 in Pakistan." <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3842048>. (2021)

<sup>27</sup> Amin Al-Astewani. "To Open or Close? COVID-19, Mosques and the Role of Religious Authority within the British Muslim Community: A Socio-Legal Analysis." *Religions* vol. 12, no. 11, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010011>. (2021)

<sup>28</sup> Choirul Amin et al. "Exploring the Prevalence of Protective Measure Adopted in Mosques during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia." (2021)

<sup>29</sup> Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al. "The impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel." (2022)

<sup>30</sup> Mohamad Iqbal Nurmansyah, Sarah Handayani, Deni Wahyudi Kurniawan, Emma Rachmawati, Hidayati, & Ahmad Muttaqin Alim. "Congregational Worshiping and Implementation of the COVID-19 Preventive Behavioral Measures During the Re-opening Phase of Worship Places Among Indonesian Muslims." *Journal of Religion and Health* 61:4169–4188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-022-01593-7> (2022)

<sup>31</sup> Jacinta C. Nwaka. "Between Religious Freedom and the Public Good: Reactions to Religious Restrictions to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria." *Kujenga Amani Social Science Research Council*, May 20. <https://kujenga-amani-ssrc.org/2020/05/20/between-religious-freedom-and-the-public-good-reactions-to-religious-restrictions-to-prevent-the-spread-of-COVID-19-in-nigeria/> (2020)

<sup>32</sup> Uzodigwe Nnamdi A., Akogwu Chukwunonso J., & Ezech Kelechukwu D. "The Role of Religion in the Spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria." *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development* vol. 9 no. 11, 88–93. <https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2020/v9/i11/155566-383335-1-SM> (2020)

<sup>33</sup> Bimbo Stanley Omopo. "Impact of COVID-19 on Religious Practices and Religious Conviviality in Ibadan: The Place of Religious Leaders in Maintaining Close-Knit Religious Communities." (2021)

leaders in the selected mosques in Ijebu North-East Local Government Area enforce the government's guidelines to stop the COVID-19 spread during total and relaxed lockdowns. Three research questions guided the study as follows:

- 1) How did the religious leaders in the selected mosques respond to the enforcement of Governments' guidelines during the total lockdown?
- 2) How did the religious leaders in the selected mosques respond to the enforcement of Governments' guidelines during the relaxed lockdown?
- 3) What challenges were faced by the religious leaders in the selected mosques in their efforts against further spread of COVID-19?

## **Method**

This study used a qualitative research design that relies on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected from the face-to-face interviews conducted with the Imāms of the selected mosques in Ijebu North-East Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria in West Africa. All the central mosques in the study area constituted the target population. This study was conducted in purposively selected ten (10) central mosques in the study area (see Table 1). Imāms (religious leader) of these mosques were interviewed about the enforcement activities of the mosques under their control and coordination during the total lockdown and relaxed lockdown. The interviews were guided by a self-designed semi-structured interview schedule.

The researcher scheduled meetings with the mosque leaders at their respective homes, and sometimes at the mosques' premises. Interviews were conducted in both English and in Yoruba and translated when necessary. Android smartphone was used to record the interviews. It also involves participant observation, where the researcher visited the sampled mosques during the full lockdown and attended religious services during relaxed lockdown. The secondary data were gathered from the published journals, articles, edited books, online newspapers, conference proceedings, online materials, as well as data from websites of the World Health Organization (WHO), Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), The State House (Abuja), Worldometer, World Economic Forum (WEF), UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), among others. The collected data were classified, verified, compared, and analyzed using content analytical approach. Also, the interviews were transcribed, analyzed, presented and applied thematically according to the research questions.

**Table 1.**  
**Sampled Central Mosques and their Estimated Populations**

No.	Central Mosques	Names of Imams	Population
1.	Isonyin Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Kehinde Akeusola	~ 200
2.	Odosenlu-Alaro Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Solihat Tijani	~ 250
3.	Ilese Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Noheem Lawal	~ 430
4.	Imewuro Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Taoheed Shittu	~ 120
5.	Igbeba Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Daud Eniolohunda	~ 240
6.	Idode/Imomo Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam 'Īsa Bello	~ 140
7.	Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Miikail 'Shile Rufai	~ 360
8.	Atan-Ilugun Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam A/Hakeem Adebisi	~ 170
9.	Irewon Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Ahmad Salisu Alejulehun	~ 130
10.	Imowo Central Mosque	Shaykh Al-Imam Alebiosu Hammed	~ 300

**Source:** Field Survey, 2022.

### Study Area at a Glance

This study was conducted in Ijebu North-East Local Government Area, one of the twenty local government areas in Ogun State, Nigeria. It was founded on 13 December 1996, by General Sani Abacha's military administration and was previously known as Ilugun Alaro. The local government shares borders with Ijebu East Local Government to the east, Ijebu North Local Government to the north, Ijebu-Ode to the south, and Odogbolu to the west. It has a total land area of around 118 square kilometres. Its headquarters are located in Atan Ijebu. During the 2006 Population Census, the local government's population was 96,723 people.<sup>34</sup> Ijebu North-East is divided into urban and rural areas. However, 70% of the local government population resides in rural communities. Atan, Erunwon, Odosenlu-Alaro, Ilese, Isonyin, Igbeba, Imewuro, Ododeyo, Idode/Imomo, Ijari, Irewon, and Imowo are prominent towns in the local government.

Muslims, Christians, and traditional religion worshippers make up the local government. There are cities and villages that are predominantly Christian, making it difficult to cite a local or central mosque in those areas. Muslims in the villages travel to the metropolis or other close towns with central mosques to pray *Salātul Jumu'at* and during *Īd* festivities. At the inception of Islām, Muslims banded together to build mosques in important cities so that they might worship Allāh Swt. and perform other religious rites. In most cases, new

<sup>34</sup> Joseph O. Nkwede, Ahmed O. Moliki, Kazeem O. Dauda, & Olarenwaju A. Orija. "The Role of Leadership in Governance and Development Crises at the Grassroots Level: Insights from Ijebu North-East Local Government Area, Ogun State Nigeria." In Samuel O. Oloruntoba (Ed.), *The Political Economy of Colonialism and Nation-Building in Nigeria*. Cham Switzerland: The Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73875-4\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73875-4_16), pp. 297–324. (2022)



mosques are erected with the help of Muslim communities and philanthropists, while ancient mosques are refurbished. The League of Imams and Alfas, a body of Islamic scholars and clerics, is responsible for coordinating religious activities, attending to Muslims' spiritual and moral needs, and their economic empowerment.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Mosque Leaders and enforcement of Governments' Guidelines during Total Lockdown**

The Federal Government of Nigeria after holding extensive consultations with the stakeholders, including the Federal and State Ministries of Health, NCDC, State Governments, and FCT officials, among others, declared a total lockdown with effect from 30 March 2020, at 11:01 p.m. for a preliminary two (2) weeks. The total lockdown was extended for another two weeks with the inclusion of other affected states on 27 April 2020, hence phase 2 of the lockdown began. A phased and gradual easing of the lockdown in FCT, Lagos, and Ogun was announced with effective from 5 May 2020<sup>35</sup>.

The government provided guidelines for the enforcement of the lockdown. As a result, schools, organizations, mosques, churches, and other religious centers, retail shops and malls, and borders in FCT, Lagos and Ogun states, were shut down. Stay-at-home order was enforced. Mass gathering was restricted to funeral services only for which social distancing rules must apply, while crowds must be limited to not more than 20 persons. Inter-state movements between and within the affected states and FCT were equally restricted. The Guidelines also mandated that any company or group that offers necessities like goods and services must disclose who works there. The only exceptions were individuals working for specific government agencies and ministries, as well as those providing important services, acquiring essential goods or services, or receiving essential medical attention<sup>36</sup>.

The analysis of this study revealed that the religious leaders in the visited mosques across the local government recorded total compliance to the guidelines of both the Federal and Ogun State governments during the total lockdown. In an interview with Chairman of League of Imams and Alfas Ijebu North-East Local Government chapter, and the Chief Imam of Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque, As-Shaykh Al-Imam Miikail 'Shile Rufai, it was established that the obedience to the government's decision on COVID-19 lockdown

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<sup>35</sup> The State House, Abuja. "PTF COVID-19 Guidance on Implementation of Lockdown Policy Final." (2020)

<sup>36</sup> NCDC. "COVID-19 Guidelines on Re-Opening of Places of Worship." June 2020.

policy was inspired by what Allāh Swt says in the Glorious Qur'an that: "O you who have believed, obey Allāh and obey the Messenger and those in authority amongst you".<sup>37</sup> He assert further that protecting people's lives by complementing the efforts of World Health Organization (WHO), as well as the Federal and State governments, in eradicating COVID-19 from Nigerian society, is very crucial.<sup>38</sup>

It was equally noted that the League of Imams and Alfas of Ijebu North-East Local Government supervised the mosque leaders' strict adherence to lockdown policy order on the closure of all religious centers in collaboration with the support of security agencies. It was not surprisingly, however, to observe that no mosques defied this order. Congregational prayers were immediately suspended following the declaration by the Executive Governor of Ogun State, Prince Dapo Abiodun, in accordance with the Federal Government's lockdown policy, which began on March 30, 2020.<sup>39</sup> Shaykh Rufai equally posited that the League of Imams and Alfas had earlier instructed all Islamic authorities to preach the gospel about the inevitability of lockdown during pandemics to the populace, as Prophet Muhammad Saw, had commanded more than 1,400 years ago, as narrated in the following hadīth, "If you hear about it (an outbreak of plague in any land, then do not enter it; And if plague breaks out in your land, then do not run away from it)".<sup>40</sup>

The above hadīth emphasizes that if there is an epidemic in a specific country, state or community, one should not enter it and, if they are within it, they should remain there until the plague is contained. This narration also testifies to the fact that the cardinal objective of Islām is to protect and preserve lives. He also mentioned instances during the Prophet's SAW. lifetime in which Muslims were exhorted to pray at home rather than risk their lives in the face of impending heavy rain<sup>41</sup>. Shaykh Noheem Lawal, the Chief Imam of Ilese-Ijebu Central Mosque and the Secretary of League of Imams & Alfas Ijebu North-East chapter, expressed a similar viewpoint. They both concluded that the government's decision was in line with the Islamic principles of *hifẓu-n-nafs*,

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<sup>37</sup> Qur'an 4:59.

<sup>38</sup> Personal Interview with Shaykh Miikail 'Shile Rufai, Chief Imam of Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque, and Chairman, League of Imams & Alfas INELG chapter on 12/03/2022, 60years at his residence.

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022; Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad ibn Ismail Bukhārī. "Ṣaḥīḥ *Al-Bukhārī* 5728." *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathīr, 202AD.

<sup>41</sup> Personal Interview with Shaykh Miikail 'Shile Rufai on 12/03/2022.

making it a welcome development for Muslim leaders across the local government<sup>42</sup>.

Furthermore, majority of the Islamic scholars interviewed maintained that they ensured that the information regarding COVID-19 preventive measures were relayed to the populace in the local government through public address system and mosques megaphones. They used the opportunity of times of each daily prayers using mosques' megaphone to inform the people about proper hygiene by washing their hands using soap under running water and social distancing rule to avoid direct contact. They equally emphasized on the need to visit hospital if they perceive any symptoms of sickness. Moreover, Imams under the umbrella of the League of Imams and Alfas organized special prayer sessions at two-weeks interval, where portions of the Qur'an and the recommended prayers by Prophet Muhammad were being recited. Same prayers they enjoined every Muslim to do at home with their family members.<sup>43</sup>

According to participant observation and interviews with mosque leaders conducted between February 8 and March 22, 2022, every central mosque in the local government was closed during the pandemic as a result of lockdown enforcement policy orders from the Federal and State governments, while every religious activity, including daily and weekly congregational prayers, was discontinued when mosques were closed. It was noted that during Ramadān, mosques throughout the local government area stopped holding the daily *Tafsīrul-Qur'an*, *Iftārus-Sawm*, *Tarāwih*, and *Tahajjud* prayers that are essential to the fasting period. Moreover, due to the total lockdown policy, congregation prayers (*Salātu Īd-el-Fitri*) that are often held on the first day of Shawwal (the 10<sup>th</sup> month according to the lunar calendar), which marks the completion of the Ramadān fast and the start of a new month, were unable to take place. In addition, the customary *Īd-el-Fitri* picnics and congregational feasts could no longer hold.<sup>44</sup>

It is evident that majority of the population struggled with the lockdown measures and movement restrictions. Majority of the interviewed Islamic scholars subscribed that Muslim leaders provided necessary welfare services, spiritual and psycho-social support to their host communities, particularly the vulnerable people. They actively supported the state government in the

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<sup>42</sup> Personal Interview with Shaykh Noheem Lawal, Chief Imam of Ilese Central Mosque and the Secretary League of Imams & Alfas, on 13/03/2022 at his residence.

<sup>43</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022; Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022; Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

provision and distribution of food and sanitary materials, and encouraged well-to-do Muslims to help and donate necessary food and other commodities to needy communities.<sup>45</sup>

The foregoing analysis shows that adequate measures were taken to ensure full compliance and enforcement of the government's guidelines in the local government during the total lockdown. It indicates that mosque leaders not only offered ways of coping, surviving, and fostering optimism throughout the pandemic, but also urged faith-based organizations (FBOs) to follow government rules regarding religious assembly bans, and social distancing. This result is consistent with the findings of a study by Mohamad Nurmansyah et al., which asserted that mosques are crucial locations for health promotion initiatives. These religious leaders frequently form partnerships with pertinent stakeholders to communicate health-related messages to their flock members who are present at the mosques<sup>46</sup>. No wonder then that the World Health Organization calls for collaboration between religious leaders, faith communities with WHO, and national governments during health emergencies.<sup>47</sup>

Essa-Hadad et al. emphasized that religious leaders play a crucial role in not just putting regulations into practice but also serving as a link between the government and the communities they serve<sup>48</sup>. Wijesinghe et al. noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, religious authorities and faith-based organizations (FBOs) disseminated pertinent information about COVID-19 prevention and offered welfare, spiritual, and psycho-social support<sup>49</sup>. Gilmore et al. also stressed the need of religious leaders working together to organize community awareness campaigns and encourage COVID-19 immunization and right conduct<sup>50</sup>. This implies that the crucial role of religious leaders during health crisis cannot be overstated.

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<sup>45</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022; Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>46</sup> Mohamad Nurmansyah et al. "Congregational Worshipping and Implementation of the COVID-19 Preventive Behavioral Measures During the Re-opening Phase of Worship Places Among Indonesian Muslims." (2022)

<sup>47</sup> World Health Organization. "World Health Organization strategy for engaging religious leaders, faith-based organizations and faith communities in health emergencies." <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240037205> (2021)

<sup>48</sup> Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al. "The impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel." (2022)

<sup>49</sup> M. S. D. Wijesinghe, et al. "Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka." (2022).

<sup>50</sup> B. Gilmore, R. Ndejjo, A. Tchetchia, V. de Claro, E. Mago, A. A. Diallo, C. Lopes, & S. Bhattacharyya. "Community Engagement for COVID-19 Prevention and Control: A Rapid Evidence Synthesis." *BMJ Global Health* vol. 5 no. 10:e003188. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003188>. (2020)

## **Mosque Leaders and enforcement of Governments' Guidelines during Relaxed Lockdown**

The government announced a relaxed lockdown with effective from 17 May 2020. The initial relaxed lockdown period was prolonged for an additional two weeks, ending on 1 June 2020. Beginning on 2 June 2020 and lasting until 29 June 2020, the second phase of the relaxed lockdown was then prolonged for an additional four weeks before coming to an end on 6 August 2020. The third phase of the eased lockdown commenced with effective from 19 October 2020. According to a research by Ridwan Ibrahim et al., the government's decision to impose a modified lockdown was motivated by the total lockdown's economic costs, despite conflicting reactions that the move might exacerbate the rise in COVID-19 cases.<sup>51</sup>

One of the factors taken into account when the relaxed lockdown was announced on 2 June 2020, was lifting of ban on religious gathering and the opening of mosques albeit under certain restrictions, as stated in the COVID-19 Guidelines on Re-Opening Places of Worship published by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The Guidelines emphasized, among other things, the need to open windows and doors to allow for fresh air, provide soap, running water, and hand sanitizer at entry points, use face masks before entering, maintain a distance of two meters when praying, and fumigate places of worship with consideration for the entire building, congregation space, parking lots, and touched surfaces before resuming services. The relaxed lockdown led to a restricted gathering of no more than 20 people initially, and no more than 50 people thereafter.<sup>52</sup> The responsibility of implementing these rules and guidelines rests with the government officials, security agents, and religious leaders.

This study found that the first measure taken, according to the Guidelines, is to ensure that the environment and premises of mosques are fumigated. In view of this, every mosque visited prior to opening had undergone fumigation.<sup>53</sup> In order to provide for a free flow of air among the worshippers during prayers, those mosques opened their windows and doors.<sup>54</sup> Also, entry points must conduct temperature checks, and anyone with a temperature of

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NCDC. "COVID-19 Guidelines on Re-Opening of Places of Worship." June 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Ridwan L. Ibrahim, Kazeem Bello Ajide, & Omokanmi O. Julius. "Easing of Lockdown Measures in Nigeria: Implications for the Healthcare System." *Health Policy and Technology* vol. 9, 399–404 (2020)

<sup>52</sup> NCDC. "COVID-19 Guidelines on Re-Opening of Places of Worship." (2020)

<sup>53</sup> Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>54</sup> Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

more than 37.50C is required to leave and seek medical assistance. As such, the sampled mosques were found to have infrared temperature screening devices. The handlers were stationed at the mosques' entrances and operated the devices<sup>55</sup>. It was reported that the chosen handlers had received prior training from medical professionals, who had been asked to instruct them on how to operate and handle the equipment while working under the coordination of the League of Imams and Alfas in Ijebuland. Moreover, the League of Imams and Alfas had already instructed every mosque to purchase at least one each in order to screen their adherents before allowing them admission into the mosque<sup>56</sup>.

In addition, the results showed that all of the mosques investigated prevented crowding as much as possible. In every mosque, separate entrance and exit points were offered<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, it was discovered that, in accordance with the Guidelines, some mosques had built-in hand-washing facilities with running water, while others had hand-washing basins (see Fig. 1). Also, the attendees had been urged to conduct their ablution (*wudu'u*) at home beforehand. However, alcohol-based hand sanitizers were available next to the hand-washing sinks, and worshipers were advised—and occasionally told—to use them as soon as they entered the mosque grounds<sup>58</sup>.



**Figure 1.**  
**Hand-Washing Facilities built in front of Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque**

Findings also demonstrated that the physical distancing technique was adopted to prevent the quick spread of COVID-19 during congregational prayers or physical contact. The Imāms regularly reminded Muslim attendees to stay on specified zones and maintain a 2-meter distance from the nearest congregants. Several mosques had clearly marked areas to ensure this distance.

<sup>55</sup> Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>56</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>57</sup> Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>58</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

Figure 2 depicts the configuration at Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque in accordance with the mentioned Guidelines<sup>59</sup>.



**Figure 2.**  
**Clearly Separated and Marked Areas in Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque**

The Guidelines also mandated the use of nasal masks during congregational prayers. There were two methods to put this into practice. First, the mosque's officials ensured that all visitors wore nose masks before entering it. Most mosques had notices on usage of nose-masks posted at their entrances, such as those in Erunwon-Ijebu Central Mosque. Second, some mosque managers initially purchased packets of nose masks with mosque funds and with the assistance of Muslim philanthropists, distributing them to the faithful at the various mosques attended<sup>60</sup>.

Another area of enforcement was regular reminders by mosque leaders, who took it upon themselves to remind worshippers on a regular basis about hygiene guidelines to prevent COVID-19, such as coughing into their elbows or tissues, which must be discarded properly; avoiding shaking hands or hugs and other physical contacts that could form part of religious rituals; and using personal religious items and avoiding sharing items like Qur'ān, prayer mats, kettles, and rosaries. They, during sermons, lectures and talks, encouraged adult worshippers aged 60 and above, as well as those with underlying medical illnesses or symptoms of illness, to stay at home because they are more likely to contract the virus<sup>61</sup>.

The foregoing analysis shows that throughout the period of relaxed lockdown, the procedures outlined in the NCDC's COVID-19 Guidelines for Re-Opening Places of Worship were strictly followed. This finding is in tandem with the submissions of Wijesinghe et al. who noted that religious leaders

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<sup>59</sup> Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.

<sup>60</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>61</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022; Participant observation and Field Survey 2021/2022.



supported the health authorities to maintain COVID-19 appropriate behaviors such as maintaining physical distance, hand hygiene, and proper usage of nose masks during regular prayer activities, religious ceremonies, and festivals. They also influenced communities to comply with government regulations during weddings and funeral practices.<sup>62</sup> Essa-Hadad et al. believed that since religious leaders are more trusted than political leaders, “they have direct access to the community and are well-respected and trusted by their followers, healthcare professionals and state institutions”<sup>63</sup>.

Imāms in collaboration with other mosque officials, educate their congregants about the importance of disease prevention measures, such as proper hand hygiene, wearing masks, and maintaining social distance; encourage worshippers to limit physical contact during congregational prayers; facilitate effective communication channels with health authorities and government officials; provide spiritual, moral and financial support to community members who may be affected by the disease; and collaborate with health agencies, medical professionals and governments to implement guidelines that are in tune with Islamic doctrines<sup>64</sup>. Equally, Wijesinghe et al. opined that religious leaders during COVID-19 crisis play an integral role in addressing challenges around religious gatherings and events, building trust of the community, promoting effective communication and advocacy, identifying and responding to the unique needs of the community, and promoting specific health-related behaviors<sup>65</sup>.

Vilakati et al. noted that faith-based organizations (FBOs) play an essential role in providing healthcare and prevention services, community education, and financing. FBOs are also undoubtedly crucial in promoting public awareness and addressing social and behavioral factors associated with COVID-19 spread<sup>66</sup>. The study conducted by Mohamad Nurmansyah et al. also found that before the opening of mosques in the post-lockdown era in Indonesia, Muslims have performed congregation prayers at home. Their study observed that some

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<sup>62</sup> M. S. D. Wijesinghe, et al. “Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka.” (2022).

<sup>63</sup> Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al. “The impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel.” (2022)

<sup>64</sup> Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al. “The impact of Muslim and Christian religious leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel.” (2022); Usama Hasan. “Collaborating with religious authorities to curb COVID-19 spread during religious festivals.” *Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform*, 6 May. <https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/blogs-and-news/collaborating-religious-authorities-curb-COVID-19-spread-religious-festivals-5-tips-good-practice-looks-like/> (2020)

<sup>65</sup> Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al. “The impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders responding to COVID-19 in Israel.” p. (2022)

<sup>66</sup> Phesheya N. Vilakati et al. “The Neglected Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Preventing and Controlling COVID-19 in Africa.” (2020)

Muslims did not observe COVID-19 preventive behavioral measures during the congregational prayers due to inadequate facilities for COVID-19 prevention<sup>67</sup>. This contradicts the finding of the current study which reveals that while the selected mosques strictly adhered to COVID-19 Guidelines for Re-Opening Places of Worship, Muslims who were observing congregation prayers in those mosques followed COVID-19 preventive measures.

### **Challenges Faced by Mosque Leaders in Their Efforts Against COVID-19 Transmission**

This section identifies the challenges faced by mosque leaders in their efforts against COVID-19 transmission. The first problem identified is a lack of adequate resources on the part of mosque leaders to meet the needs of people at their various communities. The Chairman of League of Imams and Alfas, and Chief Imam of Erunwon-Ijebu, decried the random visits by the poor, needy and vulnerable persons, regardless of their religious affiliation during the COVID-19 period.

According to him, his experiences and the information at his disposal reveals that the poor, needy and vulnerable persons randomly visit religious leaders' homes, particularly Imāms, at each day during the pandemic in search of food and financial assistance due to widespread hunger and starvation. This is not to be farfetched because Imāms serve as a point of contact and a conduit between the fortunate members of society and the weaker segments. It is established that this does not have to do with religious affiliation as both Muslims and Christians were affected by negative impact of the pandemic. Besides, it shows that religious leaders are more closer to the people than the government<sup>68</sup>.

However, Imāms at their various mosques in the local government area recognized that the government's policy was followed by properly-implemented COVID-19 response initiatives. In the opinion of Shaykh Rufai, the kind gesture of the Governor of Ogun State under the Prince (Dr.) 'Dapo Abiodun-led administration should be commendable. Shaykh Rufai was appointed by the Ogun State Government, as one of the members of COVID-19 Palliative Distribution Committee, to represent the Muslim community, and to participate in the distribution of COVID-19 stimulus packages for the residents of the local government. However, it should be noted that despite the persistent efforts of the government in this regard, the resources were

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<sup>67</sup> Mohamad Nurmansyah et al. "Congregational Worshiping and Implementation of the COVID-19 Preventive Behavioral Measures During the Re-opening Phase of Worship Places Among Indonesian Muslims." (2022)

<sup>68</sup> Personal Interview with Shaykh Miikail 'Shile Rufai on 12/03/2022.

inadequate to cover all those who were in need considering the number of individuals that needed help during that period<sup>69</sup>.

In the same vein, Shaykh Rufai, among other Imāms, were however, incensed by the un-Islamic traits of some wealthy Muslims, who find it difficult to use their wealth to relieve the suffering of the underprivileged during the COVID-19 era. While other religions make the appropriate allowances for their clergy to give alms and support the needy, impoverished, and vulnerable in their communities, in addition to providing for their salary, housing costs, and children's tuitions, Muslim leaders are not afforded the same opportunity, which makes it harder for them to help individuals in need regardless of their religious affiliation. These Muslim leaders frequently go beyond their financial capacity to satisfy public expectations<sup>70</sup>.

Another problem noted in this study is the lack of belief in the existence of COVID-19 due to misconceptions and conspiracy theory as propagated in some media outlets. The scholars stated that it is not surprising to experience such disbelief among certain Muslims considering the fact that even the Governor of Kogi State could support such unpopular opinion.<sup>71</sup> Moreso, the closing of mosques and the suspension of congregational prayers incited some followers to protest against their Imāms supporting the government policies on COVID-19. Some Muslim leaders decried the distrust experienced among some of their followers. Some of them said they noted this when they tried to preach the inevitability of lockdown and its enforcement in order to reduce the transmission of the disease.<sup>72</sup> Al-Imam A/Hakeem Adebisi, Chief Imam of Atan-Ijebu Central Mosque, pointed out that some segments of Muslim youths resisted his calls against flouting the lockdown policy on gathering of maximum of 20 persons for naming ceremony.<sup>73</sup> Similar opinion was shared by other Imāms who requested for maximum support of Muslim community when it comes to health-related issues<sup>74</sup>.

The foregoing was countered, however, that those who objected to the government's decisions about the lockdown measures and other government efforts lacked sufficient knowledge of Islām<sup>75</sup>. This is because Islām is a religion of ease and not difficulty as established in the Glorious Qur'an where Allāh

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<sup>69</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>70</sup> Personal Interview with Shaykh Al-Imam Mīkail 'Shile Rufai on 12/03/2022.

<sup>71</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>72</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>73</sup> Personal Interview with Al-Imam A/Hakeem Adebisi, Chief Imam of Atan-Ijebu Central Mosque on 18/03/2022.

<sup>74</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

<sup>75</sup> Personal Interview with Mosque Leaders from 08/02/2022 to 22/03/2022.

Swt. says: “Allāh intends for you ease, and does not want to make things difficult for you”<sup>76</sup>. In another verse, Allāh Swt. says: “Allāh does not want to place you in difficulty.”<sup>77</sup> Prophetic traditions and sayings equally attest to this fact. Abu Hurayrah RA reported that the Prophet SAW. said: “Verily, the religion is easy and no one burdens himself in religion but that it overwhelms him. Follow the right course, seek closeness to Allāh, give glad tidings, and seek help for worship in the morning and evening and a part of the night”<sup>78</sup>.

This study has contributed to the body knowledge within the context of the prevention, protection, and promotion of health that religious leaders play as the most revered and trusted members of their communities. The study has made it possible to demonstrate to the outside world the substantial contributions made by religious leaders in the selected mosques across the Ijebu North-East Local Government Area. Thus, the importance of this study in the field of Islamic contemporary studies cannot be overstated.

## Conclusion

Religious leaders have significantly played vital role in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. Notable Imāms at their respective mosques in Ijebu North-East Local Government Area of Ogun State largely complied with the COVID-19 preventive measures, and enforced guidelines of both the Federal and Ogun State governments during the total lockdown. Daily and weekly congregation prayers, Ramadān *Tafsīrul-Qur’ān*, *Iftārus-Saḥm*, *Tarāwīḥ*, *Tabajjud*, congregation worships during the *Īd-el-Fitri* and *Īd-el-Adhā* festivals, and *Mawḥud-en-Nabiyy* celebrations were suspended. They preached in support of government's lockdown policy in line with the Prophetic teachings. During the relaxed lockdown, mosque leaders strictly followed the NCDC’s COVID-19 Guidelines for Re-Opening Places of Worship on fumigation of mosque environments, use of infrared temperature screening equipment to check worshippers before entry, placement of hand-washing station/basins and hand sanitizers at the entrance of every mosque, and a clearly marked mosque grounds to ensure a 2-meter separation between worshippers.

However, the lack of sufficient resources on the side of Muslim leaders, lack of belief in the existence of COVID-19 due to misconceptions and conspiracy theory propagated in some media outlets, as well as protest and distrust among some Muslims, are among the challenges that have affected mosque leaders in order to effectively curb the undue transmission of COVID-19. In order to

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<sup>76</sup> Qur’an 2:185

<sup>77</sup> Qur’an 5:6

<sup>78</sup> Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 39

make the religious leaders more proactive in mitigating COVID-19 pandemic and other related diseases, the government, wealthy Muslims, and philanthropists should endeavor to provide the necessary spiritual, financial and moral support for the League of Imams and Alfas, the umbrella body for all Muslim leaders in Yorubaland. Above all, Muslim leaders should intensify efforts to support the government at all levels in their mission to rid the nation of coronavirus disease and other related ailments.

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