



GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST  
MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

Platform for Prevention

# RELIGION, THE PUBLIC AND STATES IN AFRICA

---

ADDRESSING COVID-19 MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS  
AND HATE SPEECH IN SOUTH SUDAN AND NIGERIA

Edited by Adewale Olusola Adeboye, PhD

Copyright: Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes  
and Africa Working Group, September 2021

GAAMAC thanks its donors, in particular the Swiss Federal  
Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), for their continuous  
and generous support.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT GAAMAC</b>	2
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	3
Introduction	4
The Public and Religion in Africa	5
COVID-19: The Game Changer in Religious Practices and Health Security Issues	6
Religious Dimensions to Covid-19 Misinformation and Fake News	7
Outlook of Covid-19 Triggered Misinformation, Fake News and Hate Speech	8
Faith-Based Institutions' Roles in Covid-19 Preventive Measures	9
Conclusion	10
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	11

# ABOUT GAAMAC

---

## ABOUT THE GLOBAL ACTION AGAINST MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

The Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC) is a global inclusive network of states, civil society and academic institutions that aim to support states in establishing national architectures and policies for the early and permanent prevention of atrocities. As a platform, GAAMAC convenes its diverse community in-person and online to openly share good practices, expertise and experiences without pointing fingers and to look instead for concrete and feasible solutions. Since 2013, it organizes global meetings every two years.

[www.gaamac.org](http://www.gaamac.org)

## THE AFRICA WORKING GROUP

The GAAMAC Africa Working Group (G-AWG) is one of the regional initiatives originally created during the GAAMAC II global meeting held in Manila, the Philippines, from 2-4 February 2016. The G-AWG is made up of a cross-section of practitioners, academics and policy makers working on mass atrocity prevention in the African continent.

[www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group](http://www.gaamac.org/africa-working-group)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 
- Covid-19 altered political process: In South Sudan the pandemic surfaced at a time when the country's conflict parties had just taken a step forward in the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement.
  - Nothing is done without religion: In South Sudan and Nigeria, like many other African nations, there are hardly any issues of national discourse unaffected by religious coloration, innuendos or sentiment.
  - Triggered disenchantment: Religious people in both countries thought that in times of crisis they needed God more and therefore places of worship should remain operational and functional.
  - Well-thought of religious leaders come to the table with some trustworthiness and credibility: This ensure religious institutions and their hierarchy are able to offer both practical and theological responses (healing and solace for human suffering).
  - Referent power: Religious leaders have strong networks and access to different levels of power that naturally allow them to shape public opinions.

## Introduction

Ten years after gaining independence from Sudan, Republic of South Sudan remains the world's newest country with population estimates slightly more than 11 million people. By contrast Nigeria, which gained independence from the British in 1960, is Africa's most populous country with more than 206 million people.<sup>1</sup> While South Sudan<sup>2</sup> and Nigeria<sup>3</sup> have different political histories and evolutions, it is interesting to note that in both countries the role of religion before and after state formation has been critical, prominent and influential. There are hardly any issues of national discourse in both countries unaffected by religious coloration, innuendos or sentiment. Similarly, despite differences in the history of both countries, conflict, violence and insecurity continue to hamper developmental efforts and the well-being of the people.<sup>4</sup>

The reality of the role that religion plays in South Sudan was succinctly captured by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in a report titled *The Religious Landscape in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities for Engagement*. The report notes that "South Sudan today presents a mystifying dichotomy of incompatible truths. It is both deeply infused with religion and savagely torn apart by war and violence, including intercommunal violence".<sup>5</sup> Comparably, in Nigeria, there is no shortage of religious dimension for nearly everything imaginable in the country.<sup>6</sup> Although religion in Nigeria is diverse, to an average Nigerian it is both a way of life and a pole of attraction for political expression and cultural awareness.

The outbreak of Covid-19 late in 2019 and its eventual heavy global impact has not only resulted in disruptions to the economy but has also altered political processes, technological thinking and widened the realities of the discussions about fake news, hate speech and even the role of religion, especially in managing critical human situations. In terms of specific impact, in South Sudan the pandemic surfaced at a time when the country's conflict parties had just taken a step forward in the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement.<sup>7</sup> South Sudan Transitional Government of National Unity was inaugurated in February 2020 and by the third week of March, the Government of South Sudan introduced safety measures to prevent the virus from spreading.<sup>8</sup> For Nigeria, as the largest population in Sub-Saharan Africa, with long-standing travel and trade links worldwide, the global pandemic eventually arrived in the country on 27 February 2020.<sup>9</sup> About a month later, on 29 March 2020,

---

1 Olorunda, S. 2019. Religion as a Tool for Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress in Nigeria. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333681875\\_Religion\\_as\\_a\\_tools\\_for\\_Unity\\_and\\_Faith\\_Peace\\_and\\_Progress\\_in\\_Nigeria/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333681875_Religion_as_a_tools_for_Unity_and_Faith_Peace_and_Progress_in_Nigeria/citation/download)

2 Rothfuss, R. & Joseph, Y. 2015. The Role of Religion in the Formation of a New State on the World Map: South Sudan. In: Brunn S. (eds) *The Changing World Religion Map*. Dordrecht, Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6\\_184](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6_184)

3 Terwase Sampson, I. 2014. Religion and the Nigerian State: Situating the De Facto and De Jure Frontiers of State – Religion Relations and Its Implications for National Security. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 3(2): 311–339. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/nwt026>

4 Reliefweb, Conflict Is Still Africa's Biggest Challenge in 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/conflict-still-africa-s-biggest-challenge-2020>

5 Wilson, J. 2019. The Religious Landscape in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities For Engagement. *Peaceworks* 148. [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/pw\\_148-the\\_religious\\_landscape\\_in\\_south\\_sudan\\_challenges\\_and\\_opportunities\\_for\\_engagement.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/pw_148-the_religious_landscape_in_south_sudan_challenges_and_opportunities_for_engagement.pdf)

6 Sokoh, G.C. 2019. Primordial Sentiments, Nation Building and the Continuing Crisis of Democracy in Nigeria. [https://www.ripublication.com/gjps19/gjpsv7n1\\_02.pdf](https://www.ripublication.com/gjps19/gjpsv7n1_02.pdf)

7 Awolich, A. A. 2021. COVID-19 and the Political Transition in South Sudan. *Global Journal of Political Science*. 7(1): 9–21. [https://media.africportal.org/documents/6037464ce7120\\_COVIDAndThePoliticalTransitionInSouthSudan\\_Full.pdf](https://media.africportal.org/documents/6037464ce7120_COVIDAndThePoliticalTransitionInSouthSudan_Full.pdf)

8 Malak, G. 2020. South Sudan on a lockdown over coronavirus fears The East African. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/south-sudan-on-a-lockdown-over-coronavirus-fears-1439180>

9 Andam, K., Edeh, H., Oboh, V., Pauw, K., & Thurlow, J. 2020. Impacts of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Poverty in Nigeria. *Advances in Food Security and Sustainability* 5: 145–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.af2s.2020.09.002>

President Muhammadu Buhari ordered a ban on economic activities and social gatherings in Abuja and some cities considered as high risk.<sup>10</sup> As the impact of Covid-19 was felt, certain misconceptions and misinformation about the virus persisted.

With galvanized misconception about Covid-19 raging, the uncertainties and novelty associated with the outbreak provided grounds for misinformation and ultimately hate speech directed at a wide range of people and ethnic groups. The risk of likely atrocity crimes also increased. And with South Sudan's and Nigeria's histories of ethnic/religious tensions, human rights violations and weak/unaccountable government institutions, it was important to look carefully at the potential implications of Covid-19 for atrocity crimes and consider the religious dimension.

## **The Public and Religion in Africa**

In South Sudan and Nigeria, typical of many African nations, religious beliefs are concerted parts of societal life and living.<sup>11</sup> In both countries, there is strong connection to divinity and a supreme being. Such a belief system ultimately shapes people's socio-economic, political and scientific world views and realities.

Unlike Nigeria, reliable data is scarce in South Sudan and religious demographics are difficult to obtain. What is obvious, however, is that a majority of the 2015 estimated total population of 12 million in South Sudan are Christian.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Nigeria's religious landscape is well- documented, showing how Islam and Christianity shared the population equally between them. With a population estimate of 203.5 million, a 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life estimated the Christian/Muslim ratio in Nigeria to be around 48.1 percent Christian and 50 percent Muslim, with the remaining percent belonging to other or no religions.<sup>13</sup>

Established arguments contend that religion is both a source for conflict and a channel for peace.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, some of the most violent conflicts across Africa and the world have been caused or triggered by religion, while faith-based interventions have also brought some of the most difficult warlords to their knees. Hence, in times of peace, religion has been source of a joy for many. At the same time, during times of difficulties, turmoil and uncertainties such as the Covid-19 pandemic, religious communities and faith-based organization stand vital in providing succour, comfort and shoulders to lean upon. Religious actors' contributions to peace and security architectures suggest that issues associated with religion or faith are never to be treated in isolation within the human security paradigms.

---

<sup>10</sup> COVID-19: Nigeria Announces Lockdown of Major Cities – Confirmed Cases of Coronavirus Rise to 111, Say Authorities. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-nigeria-announces-lockdown-of-major-cities/1784358>

<sup>11</sup> Agbiji, O. & Swart, I. 2015. Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective. *Scriptura*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291042455\\_Religion\\_and\\_social\\_transformation\\_in\\_Africa\\_A\\_critical\\_and\\_appreciative\\_perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291042455_Religion_and_social_transformation_in_Africa_A_critical_and_appreciative_perspective)

<sup>12</sup> South Sudan 2018 International Religious Freedom Report <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SOUTH-SUDAN-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Diamant, J. 2019. The countries with the 10 largest Christian populations and the 10 largest Muslim populations. Pew research center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/>

<sup>14</sup> Religion & Peacebuilding: Religion & Peacebuilding Processes. <http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/index9aa2.html?pageld=1827>

## COVID-19: The Game Changer in Religious Practices and Health Security Issues

The Covid-19 pandemic completely changed our world, altered our work ethics and in some instances forced compromise on certain cherished religious practices and events. The pandemic has also broken down some of the social fabrics holding communities together.<sup>15</sup> Overall, associated fear and tensions brought by the virus either triggered discrimination or reinforced labelling of others in a very derogatory manner.<sup>16</sup> As the pandemic ravaged the world, governments everywhere struggled to curtail the spread of the virus through lockdowns and restrictions. Within a short time, modes, methods and rituals of worship established over decades and even centuries witnessed sharp distortions.<sup>17</sup> Political, social and religious/faith-based gatherings were either strictly regulated, curtailed or cancelled. Sacred observances, rites, festivals, pilgrimages and religious-related events could not be held. For the first time since 1932, pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims was cancelled.<sup>18</sup> And for the first time in 1,600 years, no pilgrims were allowed in the Holy Land of Jerusalem for the Christian faithful.<sup>19</sup>

In the midst of the many uncertainties brought by the pandemic, a large number of religious communities struggled to maintain their faith traditions and core values of caring for the most vulnerable and providing social services, including hunger relief, childcare and protection. The closing of places of worship to prevent the spread of Covid-19 indirectly put the beneficiaries of these programmes in serious danger. Other associated social responsibilities of religion to the wider community also dwindled. Many who rely on and benefit from religious charity, relief and care have experienced such support suddenly becoming threatened. Not only that, a few religious leaders have had their income significantly reduced. These restrictions and limitations notwithstanding, people across most of Africa, including in South Sudan and Nigeria, continue to look to their faith to keep a sense of community, making the actions and inactions of religious leaders more important. Of note, it is people's attachment to their faith and religious traditions that made them reliant on religious leaders for guidance and modelling even during the pandemic.

---

<sup>15</sup> BFPG. What Does COVID-19 Mean for the Social Fabric of Our Nations? <https://bfpg.co.uk/2020/04/covid-19-social-fabric/>

<sup>16</sup> UNAIDS. 2020. Addressing Stigma and Discrimination in the COVID-19 Response. [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/covid19-stigma-brief\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/covid19-stigma-brief_en.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Moron, M., Biolik-Moron, M. & Matuszewski, K. 2021. Alterations in Religious Rituals Due to COVID-19 Could Be Related to Intragroup Negativity: A Case of Changes in Receiving Holy Communion in the Roman Catholic Community in Poland. *Religions* 12(4): 240. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040240>

<sup>18</sup> Abu Sneineh, M. 1 April 2020. Plagues, Politics and Conflict: Hajj Cancellations Over the Centuries. *Middle East Eye*. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-muslims-hajj-cancel-pilgrim>

<sup>19</sup> Gilad, M. 6 October 2020. For the First Time in 1,600 Years: No Pilgrims in the Holy Land. *Haaretz*. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-for-the-first-time-in-1-600-years-pilgrims-stopped-coming-to-the-the-holy-land-1.9209863>

## Religious Dimensions to Covid-19 Misinformation and Fake News

Religion and religious activities remain a complex system of beliefs that are shared and contested. So, it was critical to interrogate such complexity and its prominence in relation to Covid-19 misinformation and related fake news in South Sudan and Nigeria. As supported in literature, it comes out clear from the G-AWG empirical research that religious identity, beliefs and practices correlate with behaviours undertaken or avoided under the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> For example, some religion adherents were of the opinion that wearing a face mask bows to the dictates of science, especially in contrast to the strength of one's own spiritual devotion and belief in miraculous protection.<sup>21</sup>

As generally observed across East Africa, Covid-19-related misinformation, fake news and hate speech took on some interesting dimensions. Measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as banning gatherings including religious gatherings, affected all religions. But fake news highlighted that the intention of the government was to stop people from worshipping their god. This triggered disenchantment among religious people who thought that in times of crisis, they needed their god more and therefore places of worship should remain operational, functional and accessible.

This dilemma of managing religious expectations in East Africa was worsened in South Sudan and Kenya, who share borders with Tanzania. The late Tanzanian President John Magufuli took a very different approach towards Covid-19, encouraging churches and mosques to pray for Tanzanians to be protected from the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> Kenyans and South Sudanese perceived that these prayers worked because Tanzania did not suffer a major outbreak of the virus.

By holding tight to such strong belief in the miraculous, adherents of religion in South Sudan and Nigeria perceived measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19 to be an imposition on and infringement of their freedom of religion.<sup>23</sup> This notion created significant tension between the public and the state. In Nigeria, a section of Christian leadership considered the ban on religious gatherings as selective and "Satan's grand strategy" to muffle religious voices and activities both globally and in the country.<sup>24</sup>

In Nigeria and South Sudan, after the complete lockdown was relaxed, places of worship were allowed to operate with not more than 30-50 people in attendance; however, in South Sudan, Covid-19 protocols still excluded vulnerable ages of above 58 and below 13. With this arrangement, fake news again insinuated that most leadership in Christian churches was being targeted as opposed to the younger leadership in Muslim mosques.<sup>25</sup> There was an outcry over how the religious institutions were expected to operate without most of their leadership.<sup>26</sup>

---

**20** Ishmael Festus Jaja, Madubuike Umunna Anyanwu & Chinwe-Juliana Iwu Jaja. 2020. Social Distancing: How Religion, Culture and Burial Ceremony Undermine the Effort to Curb COVID-19. *South Africa, Emerging Microbes & Infections* 9(1): 1077-1079. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1769501>

**21** Hill, T. D., Gonzalez, K. & Burdette, A. M. 2020. The Blood of Christ Compels Them: State Religiosity and State Population Mobility During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health* 59(5): 2229–2242.

**22** Charles Kombe, 27 March 2020. Tanzanian President Criticized for Refusing to Close Places of Worship. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/tanzanian-president-criticized-refusing-close-places-worship>

**23** Lichtenstein, A., Ajayi, R. & Egbunike, N. 2020. Across Africa, COVID-19 Heightens Tension Between Faith and Science: Some Leaders Reject Expert Advice to Ban Religious Gatherings. <https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/across-africa-covid-19-heightens-tension-between-faith-and-science/>

**24** Oluwasegun Oluwadamilare. 1 January 2021. Bishop Oyedepo: Coronavirus Is Devil's Hypocrisy to Weaken the Church Globally. Today Online News. <https://www.today.ng/news/nigeria/bishop-oyedepo-coronavirus-devils-hypocrisy-weaken-church-globally-336787>

**25** Author interview, via Zoom with a participant from Yeï, South Sudan, October 2020.

**26** Lichtenstein, A., Ajayi, R. & Egbunike, N. 2020. Across Africa, COVID-19 Heightens Tension Between Faith and Science: Some Leaders Reject Expert Advice to Ban Religious Gatherings. <https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/across-africa-covid-19-heightens-tension-between-faith-and-science/>

## Outlook of Covid-19 Triggered Misinformation, Fake News and Hate Speech

---

**Misinformation, fake news and hate speech** have both negative and positive functions. Conversely, misinformation and fake news distort social facts, and they produce suspicion and distrust, thereby enhancing social conflict.<sup>27</sup> On the positive side, misinformation and fake news stimulate discussions of social issues. Amidst all of this, religious leaders can help in dissolving suspicions embedded in misinformation and fake news by translating them to better social discourse. Also, religious leaders can provide authoritative analysis of misinformation while helping their various platforms and constituents identify misleading and problematic contents relevant to the pandemic.

**People, decision makers, and health-care workers** all struggled to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance due to misinformation and fake news of Covid-19 thus making life hard for everyone. Covid-19 comes with people feeling anxious, depressed, overwhelmed, emotionally drained and unable to meet important demands.<sup>28</sup> However, well-thought of religious leaders come to the table with some trustworthiness and credibility that can ensure religious institutions and their hierarchy offer both practical and theological responses (healing and solace for human suffering) that comprise explanations for the meaning of such phenomenon as Covid-19.

In times of crisis, conflict and even pandemics such as Covid-19, certain patterns of human behaviour exhibited by individuals, communities, societies and states indicate that societies can easily become less tolerant of one another. And more often than not, any form of exclusion against people, especially against people's faith, becomes difficult to be justified. We must be reminded that acts of violence and genocidal atrocities do not emerge out of a vacuum. They are ultimately products of negative attitudes and derogatory speech that cumulatively contribute to the climate and the context in which violent acts become atrocities.

In Africa, as demonstrated with case studies from South Sudan and Nigeria, because a large percentage of the population embrace one form of religion or the other, at the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic religion adherents failed to distinguish the pandemic experience from their religion. Such people believed that Covid-19 could not affect those who strongly trusted their god, which in reality was not absolutely correct. Even with fully fledged Covid-19 cases abounding, religiously inclined individuals in both countries, insisting their faith could always heal them, still held the belief that by praying and trusting their supreme being, they would be safe from Covid-19.

This above notion does not reflect the entire picture for South Sudan and Nigeria. Some religious leaders have indeed been conscious of the importance and the need to observe and comply with Covid-19 protocols and guidelines. For such leaders, to reduce the need for in-person gatherings, they adopted innovative and creative options, aiming to inspire their communities to accept the new normal as a temporary reality. Hence, in both countries, some Christian-focused spiritual activities such as large masses, baptisms, fellowship meetings and weddings were temporarily halted while corresponding Muslim practices such as washing and the process of shrouding the body before burial were also affected.

---

<sup>27</sup> Kim, S. & Kim, S. 2017. Impact of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident on Belief in Rumors: The Role of Risk Perception and Communication. *Sustainability* 9: 2188.

<sup>28</sup> PAHO (Pan American Health Organization). Understanding the Infodemic and Misinformation in the Fight Against COVID-19. <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/understanding-infodemic-and-misinformation-fight-against-covid-19>

## Faith-Based Institutions' Roles in Covid-19 Preventive Measures

---

In spite of resistance from some selected faith-based organizations in South Sudan and Nigeria, religious leaders continue to play their part in terms of awareness campaigns and measures to demystify the misconceptions regarding Covid-19.<sup>29</sup> In Nigeria, most religious groups started using virtual means and technological tools to preach, thereby reinforcing the use of preventive measures against Covid-19. While the lockdown and restrictions on social gatherings persisted, to speak to large audiences, some preachers began using local radio stations to preach and speak about Covid-19 mitigating methods.

Over time, the advocacy roles of faith-based institutions to ensure that preventive measures were put in place grew, and religious bodies gained a foothold in the forefront campaign to prevent the spread of the disease. Some faith-based organizations provided handwashing facilities such as jerrycans, buckets, hand sanitizers and soaps, and even facemasks.

In South Sudan, owing to many Covid-19 messages being presented in English, religious leaders also played some role in translating such messages into local dialects for people to understand and comply with necessary preventive protocols. The religious leaders also permitted posters promoting awareness of Covid-19 protocols to be placed in worship centres. Some of the other places where religious groups have made positive impacts include market squares and rural areas. This they do together with other civil society actors.<sup>30</sup>

As most religions are built on faith and beliefs, it is often said that the absence of faith is fear. The novel Coronavirus was accompanied by worldwide uncertainty and fear, at both individual and societal levels. The religious dimension of misinformation and fake news experienced by people in South Sudan and Nigeria shows that Covid-19 carries issues not solely driven by the pandemic outbreak. As people experienced sudden events relating to the pandemic, associated fear prompted them to source and gather as much information as possible. Unfortunately, with the uncertainties of Covid-19, vast amount of data publicly available to people included both true and false information. As fear levels increased, in both countries reasoning and rational judgments became paralysed, largely due to exposure to information overload, misinformation, false information, fake news and hate-related speeches.

---

<sup>29</sup> The role of Nigeria's faith-based organizations in tackling health crises like COVID-19. <https://www.africaportal.org/features/role-nigerias-faith-based-organisations-tackling-health-crises-covid-19/>

<sup>30</sup> Author interview, via Zoom with a participant from Juba, South Sudan, October 2020.

## Conclusion

---

The Covid-19 pandemic was the source of deep concerns for religious practices and the state. As the pandemic impacted religion and faith through multidimensional restrictions, disaffection arose between political authorities and religious adherents, leading in some cases to conflicting situations especially where governments insisted on limiting gatherings to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>31</sup> Some sections of faith-based leadership both in South Sudan and in Nigeria continually contended that religion can serve as the “balm of Gilead” for the soul, maintaining that regular religious practices are scientifically connected with better emotional health outcomes.<sup>32</sup> As the controversies and tensions deepened, the long-standing anger, combined with misconceptions and preconceived notions, grew.

The influence carried by religious leaders is embedded at grassroot and community levels. Religious leaders have strong networks and access to different levels of power, which naturally allow them to shape public opinions. Religious leaders are therefore ripe for mass atrocity prevention actions, necessary to shape public opinions and model acceptable actions that an era of pandemic such as Covid-19 requires.

The Covid-19 pandemic remains an ongoing reality. GAAMAC therefore, through the G-AWG, should strive to bring up conversations and exchange good practices and lessons learned from the case studies in South Sudan and Nigeria. It should ensure that religious and community leaders, including state actors, have firm understanding of the negative consequences of pandemic-triggered misinformation, fake news and hate speech, and how to prevent them.

---

<sup>31</sup> Author in-person interview with a participant in Kano, Nigeria, November 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Author interview via Zoom with a participant from Juba, South Sudan, October 2020.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

---

To be more effective in responding to the pandemic and related future issues, religious-based institutions and policymakers should be helped to engage constructively with each other using the following five campaign themes.

- **Awareness Campaigns** to make religious and faith-based leaders understand how misinformation, fake news and hate speech work and be prepared to protect themselves against any attempts of intolerance, brainwashing and hatred.
- **Affirmative Campaigns** to put different faith-based groups that are targets of misinformation, fake news and hate speech into a positive light.
- **Obstructive Campaigns** to fight for criminalization of misinformation, fake news and hate speech and lead constructive national and international campaigns to prevent hate speech from influencing their adherents.
- **Preventive Campaigns** to share information and teach on how to avoid the attitudes that encourage misinformation, fake news and hate speech.
- **Remedial Campaigns** to combat the existing or manifest level misinformation, fake news and hate speech contents and attitudes among their followers.



**GAAMAC**

**GAAMAC Support Office**  
C/o Centre Jean-Jacques Gautier  
10 route de Ferney  
1202 Genève (Suisse)

 **+41 (0)22 552 11 42**

 **contact@gaamac.org**

 **@GAAMAC\_org**

 **Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC)**