

Fatima Akilu Case A: The rise of a quiet leader

In 2015, Fatima Akilu found herself sitting at the kitchen table with her sister, shocked and saddened by what has just happened to her, wondering what to do next. Should she fight to defend her reputation? Or return to a quiet life away from the big government role she has just been fired from?

Fatima Akilu never intended to be a leader. But in 2012, she was appointed Director for Behavioural Analysis and Strategy at Nigeria's Office of the National Security Adviser (NSA), charged with leading the country's efforts to combat the effects of the violent extremism of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups.

The programme she designed, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), was a multi-faceted approach that included prison de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation initiatives, strategic communication initiatives, and policy changes in the areas of education and mental health to provide post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) counselling.

Such an all-encompassing programme required someone with a highly diverse set of skills to set it up. If Fatima was uniquely well equipped in terms of skills and experience to design the programme, she was – as she is the first to point out – an extremely unlikely choice of leader.

The journey to selfhood

Fatima was born in Kaduna, Nigeria, to a Muslim father and a Catholic mother, in a house full of books, noise and high expectations. Her father, a respected civil servant, worked for the government and her mother stayed at home, raising seven children. "I think my father expected her to do that. But the independence of girls was very important to my mother, and to her mother, too," Fatima recalls.

Things changed when she was six years old and her father died: "My mother had to look after us and continue to pay our school fees, so she had to go out to work. And we saw my mum getting up and really defining herself and her life. Decades before that, my grandmother's husband also died when she was young. And she also had children in school. She started baking bread to earn a living. The education of girls, the independence of girls, was very important to those two women."

Besides a formal school education, Fatima grew up in a highly literary household where she was "encouraged to read pretty much everything", including Shakespeare and classic British and European fiction and poetry. And, because her father was in government, "all the nation-builders after independence who went on to become presidents would come to our house for dinner."

It is no surprise that an educated, political family would entertain dignitaries in their home, but the Akilu household also played host to an altogether different type of guest: people on the very margins of society, invited by Fatima's grandmother: "She never allowed us to make a