

The Role of Muslim Scholars in Kwara Politics up to the Fourth Republic

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Abstract: Man is both a religious and political animal. Borne out of an in-depth thinking and observation of things in his environment, man came to the understanding, perhaps, through intuition, about the existence of a supernatural being who controls things that are beyond human comprehension. Thus, he fashioned out ways of worshipping Him. Man's thought was later confirmed through revealed books which refined man's ways of worship. As man increased in number and lived communally, there was the need to control human behaviour. Thus, the art of governance evolved. Both religion (traditional) and politics are the products of man's physical and social environments. The two, right from the outset, have continued to influence each other. In matters of religion, politics is brought to bear and vice-versa. Scholars of religious history are varied in opinion as to the relationship between religion and politics. While some believe they are inseparable, there are some who believe that their marriage is that of inconvenience and therefore, they should be separated. In spite of all this, the two concepts complement each other in all human societies. In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and politics or all other aspects of life. In fact, Islam has been described as a complete way of life. This paper examines the influence of religion on the political activities championed by the Ulama class (Islamic scholars) of and in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital. This paper avers that religion and politics are twin sisters that should not be separated. Furthermore, it concludes that Ilorin's Islamic scholars played significant roles in the establishment, nurturing, and sustenance of democracy in Kwara State in the Fourth Republic.

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Introduction

Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, upon which this research is focused on, is a settlement on which many researches had been done, and yet, it is still begging for more ink because of its complexities and progressive development in all ramifications. Researchers have established that the name “Ilorin”, given to an important city which has turned into the capital of Kwara State in this modern time, was a derivative of either Ilu-Erin (abode of elephants), Ilo-Irin (a place where iron implements were sharpened), Ilu-Irin (deposit of iron), or Ironi (city of alligator pepper) depending on the opinion of either a researcher or a discussant. Ilorin, up to 1800, referred to a fraction of the present municipal, but by 1823, with the establishment of the Emirate system, the system became added to the name as was the case in other emirates to become Ilorin Emirate. The emirate system made the name elastic as it then spread far and wide through the efforts of Muslim soldiers, scholars, and merchants who were agents of Islam and representatives of the emirate authority. Until 1823, Ilorin comprised of different hamlets with decentralised authorities but with mutual relationship. Since 1823, it became a conglomerate under the banner of Islam and with Sharia as the system of governance. With the Sharia in place, the *‘ulama*, constituted the legislative class that advised the Emir on matters of the Sharia. The status of Ilorin evolved from being the seat of the emirate to being the province capital and currently, the capital of the Kwara state of Nigeria. As a capital city, all activities start there and radiate to the suburb. As the epicentre of Islamic learning, the activities of scholars often begin in the city and their effects spread over to the other local governments and beyond. Thus, using the five local governments in the emirate as a focus readily represent the rest of the local government areas, and using the Muslim scholars of Ilorin and in Ilorin also represent the other Muslim scholars in the suburb.

Generally, religion is regarded as a body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being, owing to his intuition of the sacred, ultimate reality, and his expression of that awareness (Adeniyi, 1993). In Nigeria, there are three major religions: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Christianity. The focus

of this paper is on the Muslim scholars and their political activities. Thus, Islam, the backbone of their activities, needs to be examined in brevity. Islam is regarded as a religion of peace and a way of life. More specifically, it is a means of complying with divine ordinances which are demonstrated by approaching and worshipping God in order to escape His wrath and earn His favour (Ilega, 2001). Adherents of monotheistic religions of the world count on God for safety of their lives and property, security of territories, victory at wars, and peaceful co-existence in the society (Ilega, 2001).

On the other hand, politics has to do with seeking and exercising of power (Tansey, 1995). In Nigeria, political power is sought through two major means; peaceful (civil rule) and forceful (colonialism and military). The concern in this paper is the peaceful means which is the civil rule, particularly the Fourth Republic which began in 1999.

Exploring the Nexus between Religion and Politics

Man, according to political scientists, is a political animal which distinguishes him from other lower level animals. At the same time, man, according to the sacred books, is the vicegerent of God on Earth, which places on him the management of God's order and resources (human and material). Thus, man on Earth is both political and spiritual or vice-versa. Consequently, since man handles both the spiritual and political fronts, it will be hard to separate the two concepts; politics and religion. This is in contradistinction of a cross section of man's call for the separation of the two because of the belief that politics is dirty and evil, while religion is good and godly (Akama, 2001). In Nigeria, the debate on the separation of religion from politics has been on for a while but in practice, the affiliation between the two gets stronger on daily basis. Thus, religion is not only taken into politics but also there is politics in religion (Kukah, 1993).

At this juncture, it is important to stress that the attributes of God from all the monotheistic religions show that God is the custodian of both religion and politics which He institutionalised in human society (Quran 16: 90). There is no authority or power, except from God. He gives it to whoever He pleases; hence, all authorities on Earth have been instituted by God (Dopamu, 1987). Leaders are therefore accountable not only to

men but also to God. Their subjects obliged them more importantly for reasons of religion, which compel them to obey constituted authority (Davidson, 1965).

Consequently, if these are the features of religion and publics, then they need not be separated. In fact, politics could be regarded as a convenient vehicle for achieving all of the goals of religion and vice-versa. In addition, moral values, which is the bedrock of religion, often appeals to the conscience of the politicians to arrive at more rational decisions that are capable of promoting national survival (Adeniyi, 2001).

Islam transcends the borders of being a mere religion. Rather, it is a complete way of life (Abdul, 1973; Quran 4: 22, 65: 7, 2: 168). Thus, politics, which is just an aspect of human endeavour, is not left out. The Prophet of Islam was all-in-all to the Muslims, as were the companions during their lifetimes. They were religious and political leaders of the Muslim State and commanders-in-chief to the Muslim soldiers (Khan, 1990). Thus, in Islam, emphasis is placed on purposeful and honest leadership as a means of attaining peace in the society (Quran 16: 90, 4: 58).

In Nigeria, Muslim scholars have been noted for playing leadership roles. For instance, in Borno, the *'ulama* played a significant role in the establishment, stability, and longevity of the empire. The *'ulama* served in various capacities, such as *imams*, *qadis*, *wazirs*, treasurers, scribes, chief of police, diplomats, and charm makers as early as in the reign of Mai Selemma (C. 1194-1221) and under the successive administration in Borno (Balogun, 1984; Omolewa, 1986).

In Hausaland, starting from Kano to Katsina and other parts like Nupeland, rulers and *'ulama* patronised one another for good government and sustainable administration. In Yorubaland, particularly in Southwestern Nigeria, the activities of scholars in administration are well noted. According to records, during the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, rulers in the Nigerian region eagerly sought to obtain assistance of one scholar or another “in establishing long distance trade, strengthening relations with Muslim states of North-Africa, writing dispatches and orders for summoning military aid, for the issuing of administrative directives to provincial governors, for disseminating propaganda, for recording history” (Clarke, 1982).

The Antecedents of Muslim Scholars in Ilorin Politics

The Islamic scholars in Ilorin have a long standing tradition of political participation and state governance. The earliest scholars, such as Shaikh Solagberu and Shaikh Alimi were powers to reckon with before and after the formation of the Emirate system in 1823. These personalities who were leaders of their independent communities in Ilorin had served as diviners and advisers to Afonja in his bid to establish an empire of his own in Ilorin (Johnson, 1973).

Scholars in Ilorin, since the establishment of the Emirate system in 1823, have been a prime factor in the politics of the Emirate. The scholars were the learned men who interpreted the Sharia. They were indispensable in the affairs of the Emirate and could be categorised into three – the councilors or royal advisers, the diviners, and the theologians. The categorisation is conjectural because no strict boundary was maintained. Anyone could perform any role at any given time and opportunity. Strictly speaking, the advisory scholars were the three principal Imams of Ilorin – Fulani, Imale, and Gambari – who co-opted renowned scholars of their choice when the occasion demanded. The Emir issued orders after due consultation with the advisory scholars. In 1889, the Chief Imam of Ilorin, on the order of Emir Aliyu, prepared a treaty between the Emir and Macdonald, the agent of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) (Danmole, 1980). The scholars' leadership role in the performance of religious rites endeared them to the masses. Hence, they became an important intermediary class between the Emirate authorities and the masses.

From 1895 onwards, there was a drastic British encroachment on Ilorin. The people looked up to the scholars for advice on their survival and the Emirate system. The scholars, through their preaching and open antagonism to the British, mobilised the masses against the British. The scholars then provided a strong base for the defence of the Emirate against the British colonisers who were regarded as infidels. Although the Emirate was eventually conquered in 1897, the scholars persisted in their antagonistic attitude to the British authority in Ilorin.

With the establishment of the British colonial administration in Ilorin, the Emirate became a state within a state because the Emir who was the overall head in the Emirate was then subjected to the British rule. The adoption of the indirect rule system put the Emir at the helm

of affairs in the Emirate, and therefore, the scholars retained their advisory positions to the Emir. However, as a result of the series of political delimitation of the Emirate, which started in 1906, there was a gradual reduction in the size of the Emirate to its present size, which encompasses Ilorin West, East, South, Moro, and Asa local government areas of Kwara State. This, of course, affected the influence of the Emir and the scholars respectively (Jawondo, 2003).

However, unrelented efforts of the scholars at preaching and teaching in various districts of the Emirate and migration of Muslims from other neighbouring towns to the districts for religious, social, and economic activities, increased the population of the Muslims (Danmole, 1980). This increased the relevance of the scholars in the Emirate. In effect, the scholars became the sustainers of the political authority of the Emir. With democratisation, which began in 1951, the scholars became more politically relevant. Apart from having control over the dominant Muslims, they were also believed to have possessed spiritual powers to assist political office seekers to attain their objectives. Thus, political associates, leaders, and office seekers patronised the scholars for prayers, to enable them win elections and secure positions.

Furthermore, there was the general belief that the Emirate scholars were the brains behind the traumatic death of the Ilorin *Talaka Parapo* group. The group, which was formed in 1954, challenged what they described as misuse of power by the traditional elite of the Native Authority (Dudley, 1968). The group aligned with the Action Group Party of Nigeria and won elections in 1956 and 1957 in the Ilorin Emirate (Bello, 1986). However, because of its strong alliance with the Action Group and support for the proposal to merge Ilorin with the West, the scholars were opposed to the party. They saw the move as a threat to the existence of Islam, which the Emirate represented. The scholars, therefore, preached and prayed against the move. By 1958, crisis had engulfed the *Talaka Parapo* group and, by 1959, it could no longer make an impact on the political activities of the Emirate. The *Talaka Parapo* was disorganised and this was attributed to the spiritual powers of the scholars. The development popularised and increased the relevance of the scholars in the realm of politics. Since the First Republic up to date, the political influence of Muslim scholars in the Ilorin Emirate politics has been on the increase. Successive governments in Kwara State reached out to them for one assistance or the other.

Muslim Scholars and Kwara Politics in the Fourth Republic

Islamic scholars in the Ilorin Emirate played significant roles in the emergence of the Fourth Republic. Their position, as spiritual leaders in the Emirate, gave them this advantage. The Emirate population, which is essentially Muslim, has a lot of respect for the scholars as spiritual leaders.

The scholars attained this great influence and power in the society because, apart from being recognised as spiritual leaders, they have been demonstrating administrative ingenuity in the Emirate. The advisory scholars instituted the Council of Scholars, which comprised of all the renowned scholars in the Emirate. By the close of the 20th century, the scholars had organised themselves in such a way that they were interconnected with one another and consulted each other through well designated fora. The three imams, Fulani, Imale, and Gambari have a number of coordinators in their wards that were chosen from the *ratibi imams* in their quarters.

These coordinators were the eyes and ears of the imams at the ward level. Moreover, the *ratibi imams* constituted the intermediaries between members of the wards and the three Imams. This system, apart from building an aura of respect and royalty around the principal imams, also empowered the quarters' coordinators as it enabled them to have full control over their areas. The principal imams held meetings with the coordinators at interval. This arrangement spread the popularity and influence of the principal imams down to the grassroots. It, therefore, enhanced their political value. Top politicians and political office seekers lobbied them for political support.

Having known how Muslim scholars in Ilorin were launched into the political scene, it is important to examine the strategies employed by them to mobilise political support for politicians during the Fourth Republic. As the European missionaries prepared Africans psychologically for colonialism in the 19th century, the Ilorin scholars prepared the masses for the Fourth Republic. The scholars did this through persistent heart-piercing sermons in the media, at Islamic and social functions, *Jum'ah* and *Eid* prayers, as well as designated preaching centres.

The scholars, most of whom were professional preachers, attracted large audience at their preaching centres on ordinary days. During the

Ramadan, the audience usually multiplied. At the formative stage of the Fourth Republic, the scholars appealed to Muslims to participate effectively in the political activities to enable them to have a say in the political decisions and have worthy representatives in the government that would be formed. They justified their arguments with the Quran, hadith, and personal deeds and experiences of the companions. The call by the Muslim scholars influenced the participation of the Muslims in such a way that politics became well-discussed at various occasions and even in the mosques. This popularised political activities in the nooks and crannies of the Emirate.

The political office-seekers and party stalwarts attended open-air sermons and lavished money on the scholars to earn their favour and those of their staunch admirers. This enhanced the chances of the existing political parties – Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (APP), All Peoples Party (APP) now called All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and Alliance for Democracy (AD) and their flag-bearers to win active supports for their success at the polls. The scholars and the Emirate Muslims also capitalised on the advantage of the closeness of the politicians and office seekers to them, and their sermons, to seek financial assistance to renovate old or build new mosques, the Qur’anic schools, or purchase materials for use in the mosques and schools. The parties’ response to these demands usually determined who won at the polls. Those that responded to the financial needs of the scholars either as a group or as individuals usually benefited from the spiritual powers of the scholars. It could be inferred that the presence of money bags in the APP who paid the desired tribute to the scholars in Ilorin were responsible for their success at the 1999 polls in Kwara State.

Consequently, upon swearing in the elected officers, prayers were offered by scholars at various mosques and at any given opportunity for the success of the leaders. The scholars then changed the theme of their preaching from active political participation to good governance. They preached absolute honesty and transparency to the leaders in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities to the electorates. On the other hand, the people were advised to be obedient to constituted authorities. Ustaz Abdul Rasak Aduagba, admonishing the political leaders, made them understand that whatever a leader does on the position of authority, only time shall tell, as he said that, “all of you (who) are leaders (the elected and the electorate) and you shall be made

to account for your stewardship before the community and Allah” (Aduagba, 2001).

The scholars assisted the government in disseminating information about government programmes and policies to the populace. Such programmes like the prevention of HIV/AIDS, environmental sanitation, proper sewage disposal, family planning, family support, and child abuse awareness were well discussed from the Islamic point of view. They offered prayers at various Jum’ah mosques for both a successful tenure and the survival of the nation on occasions, such as Independence Day, May Day, and Armed Force Remembrance Week. At the annual Hijrah celebrations, prayers were usually offered for the government.

Consequently, in order to sustain and improve the rapport between the scholars and the government, the government reciprocated the gestures of the scholars through different means. Indeed, some scholars were given cars, Hajj tickets, contracts, cows, rams, and a host of other things during the Islamic festivals (Aminullah, 2001). However, barely after two years, disagreements occurred within the All Progressives’ Party, which was the ruling party in the state. It started between the Governor, the late Alhaji Mohammed Lawal and his political godfather, the late Abubakar Olusola Saraki. It is difficult for one to establish the cause of the rancour but oral sources believe that the issue of the second term in the office had strained their relationship (Lawal, 2001). Thus, it is no wonder that the late Shaikh Kamaludeen Al-Adabiy admonished them so that the two camps should be aware that power belongs to Allah and He gives it to whoever He likes (Kamal, 2002).

As a result, the party became factionalised into Lawal’s and Saraki’s groups. According to oral sources, vindictive steps were taken by the government against the loyalists of Saraki, who held positions in the government, and they were subsequently removed from office (Abdul Rahman, 2002). Some of the affected officers were the late Barrister Kayode Elensinla and Alhaja Nimota Ibrahim, who were commissioners for education and women’s affairs, respectively (Elesinla, 2001). Political thugs were recruited and armed to oppress and attack supporters of each group. This led to the loss of lives and property. Given this lawless situation, the scholars, through their preachings, called for order, peace, and harmony among the leaders and the society at large. They reminded

them that God is not at peace with those whose brothers' lives and property are not safe from their atrocities, and that life is sacred and should not be taken unjustly (Aduagba, 2001).

Furthermore, a series of arbitration groups, such as those by the late Shaikh Kamaludeen, the late Justice Saidu Kawu, and the late Justice Mustapha Akanbi led committees which were formed to settle the rancour between the two parties. Unfortunately, the committees could not achieve peace. The crisis deepened as it attained an ethnic dimension: Yoruba, particularly the Aare family, versus the royal Fulani.

Oral sources reveal that some of the scholars who had remained antagonistic to lawlessness became tribalised. Such scholars were said to have openly supported the government because they believed in the Yoruba cause. However, it is important to stress here that the issue of tribalism was not important in the political crisis of the Fourth Republic in Kwara State. Rather, personality clashes and egoism were much more responsible. The scholars and people supporting the government were not necessarily from the Yoruba stock. Rather, they cut across the different sections of Ilorin and Kwara State at large.

In fact, some scholars were on the side of the late Lawal who led the government, while some were on the side of the opposition group led by the late Saraki within the same party. It is important to stress that rather than the use of the tribal factor to describe the attitude of those scholars, the financial and other types of benefits from either of the groups informed their actions. The political thugs took advantage of arms in their possession to rob and kill people at will. Innocent individuals were attacked, injured, or killed (Punch, 2001). This made the police declare curfew in Ilorin, the state's capital. The curfew, which was between six am to six pm, affected the religious obligations of the Muslims. Many Muslims could not go to mosques to perform the dawn and dusk prayers. This incident agitated the minds of the scholars and rather than appealing to the warring parties for peace, they appealed to God to bring peace to Ilorin at whatever cost. A series of prayers and sacrifices were offered to God individually and collectively, covertly and overtly, and within and the outskirts of the town to bring about peace in Ilorin.

These prayers were generally believed to have brought about a change to the late Lawal-led government, which was believed to

be tyrannical and vindictive. The attitudes of some scholars after the elections confirmed this assertion. With the announcement of the election results, the thematic concern of the scholars changed from appeal to God for bringing peace to thanksgiving for the peace being ushered in. This, therefore, alludes to the assertion that the exit of the leadership of Alhaji Muhammed Lawal was the handiwork of the scholars because he was either rightly or wrongly judged to be oppressive and tyrannical, not only to co-politicians but also to some Muslim scholars. He was accused of planning to dethrone the Emir, the symbol of the emirate. The masses, who were not the cause of the problem, bore the brunt of the conflict. On 7th August 2003, a special prayer was organised and offered to Allah at Ilorin during Eid at the praying ground by the Ilorin Emirate scholars to appreciate the return of peace to Ilorin. Prayer was also said for the new Governor, Abubakar Bukola Saraki, and members of his cabinet.

Furthermore, congratulatory messages to the incumbent Governor, Bukola Saraki, by the public were characterised by statements showing that the past regime was believed to be oppressive and was brought to a halt by the scholars. For instance, most of the congratulatory messages included individuals whom the public believed were oppressed and persecuted by the last administration, and more importantly, prominent Islamic scholars for their spiritual efforts to bring Kwara State back to its former glory as the home of peace.

It is important to stress here that most of the scholars got involved in the political scene in their efforts to ensure peaceful atmosphere rather than for material gains. This is not to say that there were no scholars who were observed to be partisan. In fact, there were some scholars who enriched themselves and their reputation as scholars suffered for it.

In Nigeria, since 1999, when the Fourth Republic was established to date, there have been five phases: 1999 – 2003, 2003 – 2007, 2007 – 2011, 2011 – 2015, and 2015 – 2019. In Kwara State, the first phase government which was that of the APP, was led by the late Rear Admiral Alhaji Muhammed Alabi Alao Lawal. The second and third phases were led by Governor Bukola Saraki (the Senate President to Nigeria's 8th Assembly) under the PDP, and the fourth and fifth phases were led by Governor Alhaji Abdulfatai Ahmed under PDP in the first tenure, and later, the APC in the first three years of the second tenure, and again

back to PDP. In each phase, the Muslim scholars played a constant role of preparing the minds of the electorate for election by urging them to take an active role devoid of rancour. When the government was formed, they admonished leaders to rule with the fear of Allah to whom they are accountable. At the same time, the masses were urged to obey their leaders. While all politicians patronised the scholars to garner support to win elections, the government often extended the dividend of democracy to some members of the scholars' leadership. Prominent scholars who were known for their political comments on radio, television, and public sermons during these periods include Alfa Sanu Shehu, Alfa Adugba, Alfa Bukhari Musa, Abubakar Imam Aliagan, Aminullahi Olohunoyin, Alhaji Ibrahim Abdullah, Alhaji Olayiwola, Alfa Lukman Isale Koto, Alfa Olaoti and his group, Husein Arikewusola, Alfa Imam Mahmud Adewole, and several imams of Juma'ah mosques among others. Thus, it is important to stress here that in Kwara State today, the *'ulama* play an active role in ensuring the survival of democracy. Consequently, the question of separating religion from politics is largely of less importance among the *'ulama*.

Conclusion

This paper surveyed the role played by Muslim scholars in Ilorin, Kwara State's capital since the emergence of the Fourth Republic in 1999. The paper has established the fact that Muslim scholars in general and of Ilorin and Kwara State in particular, have had a long-standing opportunity of participating in decision making for their specialised knowledge. Based on the legacies, the current *'ulama* class in Ilorin got themselves involved in democratic governance with a view to sustaining democracy in the state. They participated through their sermons, prayers, and even open support to candidates of their choice in pre-election, election, and post-election activities. The fact that the *'ulama* are held in high esteem gives them influence over the Emirate Muslims in particular, and Kwara's Muslims in general. The politicians of the Fourth Republic exploited this influence by lobbying them to mobilise the masses to support them. This brought about a symbiotic relationship between the two parties. While the scholars mobilised support for the politicians, the government catered for the welfare of the participating scholars in cash and the kind. However, it should be

said that the relationship between the two parties could get strained as a result of misrule, and loss of lives and property that characterised the tail end of the late Governor Lawal's government in 2003, and Bukola Saraki's and Governor Abdulfatah Ahmed's government in Kwara State in 2018-2019.

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