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MUSLIM RESPONSE TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN
NIGERIA; A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH WESTERN MUSLIM

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief introduction of Islam in South-West Nigeria. It highlights the historical background of the introduction of Islam and its tradition towards political participation and leadership as secular State; its response as well as the impacts of the religion endeavours undertaken by the Muslims of Southwest Nigeria in relation to politics and rulership from the earliest generation and their impacts on the present. The paper stressed the role played by Muslims in joining political party and all other forms of political participation. Considering the nature of the topic, the researcher utilises theoretical method in data gathering. Some of the findings of the paper are that Islamic believes, secular nature of Nigeria politics, Muslims contributions in development of politics and Challenges of South-Western Muslims in the political space. This dynamic reflects a wider understanding that Muslims can influence societal development and defend their rights in a pluralistic society by exercising political leadership and participation. In the end, encouraging Muslims in the Southwest to become more politically conscious and involved is essential for promoting good governance as well as for maintaining the values of social justice, religious freedom, and communal harmony. This integration of political agency and faith highlights how Muslim participation in Nigeria's democratic process has changed over time, underscoring a persistent dedication to making a significant contribution to the country's advancement while staying true to Islamic principles.

Keywords: Islam, Politics, Political Participation, Leadership

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Introduction

Politics in Islam is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various aspects of governance, law, economy, security and social organization within Muslim societies. Islam, as a comprehensive religion, offers guidance, direction and principles for both individual behavior and collective affairs, including politics. Islam provides a framework for Muslims to navigate the political realm while adhering to religious principles and values.

Islamic political thought and practice are influenced by key sources such as the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam), the Hadith (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad), the Sunnah (the Prophet's way of life), and the scholarly interpretations of Islamic jurists and theologians. These sources form the basis for understanding the role of politics within the Islamic framework.

The advent of Islam in Africa and indeed in Nigeria has been well documented for centuries, and, profoundly, among the early converts in the West African sub-region are the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. The Yoruba people are among the most versatile and urbane tribes in Africa and have had fruitful contact with Islam for over five centuries, even before the advent of colonialism. Islam became known in Yoruba as Èsin Ìmàlè ("the Malian religion") for its inextricable association with the exotic foreigners (Gbadamosi, 2018, pp.2-7).

This paper delves into the relationship between Islam and politics, focusing on

Islamic perspectives on governance and leadership in the southwestern part of Nigeria. It also examines the impact of Muslims on politics and leadership in this region, as well as the challenges they face.

In conclusion, the study encourages Muslims in southwestern Nigeria to actively participate in political processes and leadership roles to protect and advance their interests. It also emphasizes the need for Muslim scholars and organizations to foster unity and provide ongoing political education to ensure informed and principled engagement. Furthermore, the study recommends that establishing dedicated political platforms within Muslim communities would help coordinate efforts and promote ethical leadership grounded in Islamic values.

Conceptual Clarification

Islam

Islam as a religion plays an important political role in any Muslim communities unlike Christianity in the secular state models of the west. Conclusions have been drawn suggesting that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Since the coming of Islam about 1436 years ago (counting from the day of the first afflatus); the religion and the Muslims have been passing through bloody borders (Huntington, 1997) right away from within Makka.

Islam is an Arabic word which literally means "submitting." It is fundamentally an action, a way of living one's life before God. Islam is the religion of Allah that was sent with all of the Prophets,

starting with Prophet Adam and which was followed by subsequent Prophets, from Noah to Abraham, Moses to Jesus and all the way to our Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). This is why we believe in and love all of the Prophets and Messengers. They all came with the same message to worship Allah alone. They came with Islam. Linguistically, the word 'Islam' means to humble and submit. Therefore, as Muslims we completely and willingly submit ourselves to Allah alone. This means worship is due to Him alone, it is mandatory to obey His commands and follow His path, hoping for His reward and fearing His punishment. Islam means to give precedence to Allah's commands and orders over and above our own wants and desires. The word 'salam' or 'peace' comes from the same root word as peace requires humbleness. Asad, M. (1980).

A Muslim is one who submits to God and aligns their life with what God has made plain. Animals are sometimes described as inherently "muslim" because they naturally conform to their God-given nature.

In the Muslim world, Abdul-Aziz (1998), concluded that "where religion permeates the national culture, Islamic tradition neither remains, nor can afford to remain, indifferent when addressing issues of national politics and social justice. Nonetheless, the limitations placed by religious values on the determination of national policies in a modern Muslim nation-state have never been fully explained or accepted by Muslim communities. It was against this background that the Muslims were made

to accept, adopt and take the pledge of territorial boundaries more than any other forms of religious obligations. No doubt, the consequent of which could only weaken the strength of the Muslims, means there could be no single Islamic government that would have a universal authority because the Islamic world was disintegrated through this process in order to make it weak at all cost and few followers, which to make it less powerful on the globe. Indeed the mechanism had succeeded in making the Muslims subservient to the west. In spite of that Fadl, (1990) puts that Islam was able to expand to the peak of its height, becoming the only super power around the globe during the Abbasid period. However, with the collapse of Ottoman Empire, most of the provinces under various caliphates fell within the European system of administration that was through conquest by Britain, Italy or Portugal

Politics

There is no universal definition of politics. Politics (from Ancient Greek politiká) 'affairs of the cities') is the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of status or resources. The branch of social science that studies politics and government is referred to as political science.

This framework views politics as the process through which a society makes and enforces binding decisions. The general trend in such conception is that politics is an activity that takes place in a

particular environment that is geared towards the acquisition of power for the advancement of “good life” in the early world, one may add. For example, according to David Easton (1953), he defines politics as the authoritative allocation of values in the society. While, Harold Lasswell put it as the being concerned with the issue of “who get what, when and how”. In essence, it is about power distribution and allocation of societal values in the temporal.

Harold Lasswell: A political scientist, Lasswell famously defined politics as the process of determining "who gets what, when, and how". Max Weber: The sociologist Max Weber defined politics as "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state". Bernard Crick defined politics as the activity where differing interests are reconciled by sharing power, seeing it as a peaceful way to achieve consensus. This highlights politics as a cooperative activity focused on consensus and stability.

Some political scientists see conflict as the essence of politics. Conflict is a necessary characteristic of society. Human beings differ from each other, they come from varying cultural backgrounds and have differing and complex set of preferences. People's wants are infinite and the resources possessed by societies are limited and therefore generally insufficient to satisfy everybody's desires fully. Since the resources available to society are limited, choices have to be made. (Bentley, Dobson, Grant, Roberts, 1995) It is the

necessity of making such choices which leads to conflict. The conflict does not take place between individuals but also exists between larger groups between countries, as well as within them. There is a competition for access to, or control over, a society's resources. Some political scientists see politics as a particular means of abolishing conflict by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force, so that people can live in reasonable harmony with each other.

According to the sociologists Dowse & Hughes (1972) politics is about power. They say: politics occurs when there are differentials in power. This suggests that: any social relationship which involves power differentials is political. Political relationships would extend from parents assigning domestic chores to their children to teachers enforcing discipline in the classroom from a manager organizing a workforce to a general ordering troop into battle (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995).

Political Participation

Political participation exposes the space of liberty and democratic practice provided by the political system in any country, as it is a reflection of the political awareness in a society, and one of the most important pillars of the political system, according to the great role played by political participation to establish institutional construction at all political, economic and social levels (Alnajashi et al., 2024). Political participation refers to voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to

influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies. Examples of these activities include voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on issues (“The Entrenchment of Democracy,” 2024).

Scholars differ in their definition of political participation. “By political participation we mean activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making” (Huntington and Nelson, 1976, p. 3). “By political participation, we refer simply to activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). It is important mentioning that the completion of the political participation process requires individuals who have the political interest and awareness that is the result of early upbringing through the primary groups represented in the family and the school that follow the democratic approach in raising its members, so that they become more inclined to participate than those individuals who arise in primary groups that follow an authoritarian approach.

Political participation is the most prominent in democratic societies that consider the effectiveness and institutionalization of civil society through political parties, trade unions,

interest groups, and organizations to be the basis of their political structure.

Leadership

Leadership is often described by what a leader does or the capabilities they have. Yet while the skills and behaviors of individual leaders are important, the true meaning of leadership is about what people do together. Said another way, everyone in an organization contributes to leadership. leadership as a social process that enables individuals to work together to achieve results that they could never achieve working alone (“Governance, Democracy and Ethics in Crisis-decision-making,” 2024).

Leadership is defined as the ability to instill confidence and support among individuals who are tasked with achieving organizational objectives. It also described as the practice of persuading others to understand and agree on what needs to be done, and the process of expediting specific and collaborative decisions to realize collective goals Kirkpatrick, Shelley A (1991).

In essence, leadership is the art of connecting with others on a human level to inspire collective greatness. It is a relational and emotional process, not a mechanical one, where an individual or group influences others to achieve a shared, meaningful purpose. A human-centered definition of leadership moves beyond rigid authority and transactional rewards, focusing instead on the holistic well-being, growth, and empowerment of the people being led. It is a continuous

journey of understanding and self-awareness, where a leader's vulnerability and authenticity become their greatest strengths.

Literature Review

The Nexus between Islam and Politics

The dominant perception of politics by the West on the non secularist Islamic countries is narrow. It conceives of politics along a path that literally erects a wall of separation between the temporal and spiritual worlds thereby compartmentalizing the two. The general trend in such conception is that politics is an activity that takes place in a particular environment that is geared towards the acquisition of power for the advancement of "good life" in the early world, one may add. For example, according to David Easton (1953), he defines politics as the authoritative allocation of values in the society. While, Harold Lass put it as the being concerned with the issue of "who get what, when and how". In essence, it is about power distribution and allocation of societal values in the temporal. The major objective of this paper therefore is to highlight the advantages of Islamic political order as a model of politics and governance for sustainable development in respect of its religious colorations.

In the Islamic view point, it is a religion that makes no separation between the spirituals and the temporal world? Therefore, the two are fused together. It is a complete way of life with elaborates code of conduct as contained in the Muslim's Holy Quran and the saying or Deeds of the Prophet of Islam (Sunna) as

well as that of the rightly guided caliphs. These are the guides of the life of its adherents from cradle to grave. It touches on all the aspects of life in such a manner that left no space between politics and Islam. The Muslim positions on participation and democratization range widely. Secularists argue for a democracy that observes the separation of religion and state. The Muslim conservatives hold that Islam has its own forms of governance that is incompatible with democracy. While, the moderate Muslims hold the secularist position while accommodationists believe that traditional concepts consultation (shura), consensus (Ijma), and reinterpretation (ijtihad) can develop Islamically acceptable forms of popular Participation and democratization as expressed by Ka'b he contend that; Islam, the government and people are like tent, the pole, the ropes and the pegs. The tent is Islam, the pole is the government, the rope and pegs are the people. None would be without other.

Islamic perspective on Leadership

Islam places significant emphasis on leadership as an integral aspect of guiding and organizing a community in accordance with its principles. The Quran provides guidance on leadership qualities and responsibilities. It emphasizes justice, wisdom, and accountability in leadership. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) considered the ultimate example of a leader in Islam. His leadership style emphasized humility, integrity, and a profound commitment to justice and compassion.

In Islam, leadership encompasses the process of inspiring and training volunteers to achieve a vibrant collective vision. An Islamic leader is duty-bound to act not for personal gain or for the benefit of any other organization, but solely for the sake of Allah. Leadership development in Islam places emphasis on succession planning and matters of governance. This exemplified in the process followed by the Sahaba of the Holy Prophet (SAW) in establishing a successor after his passing, which involved seeking advice from the public and obtaining collective consent for endorsement. The subsequent Caliphs, including Abu Bakr Siddiq (RA) and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, were appointed and confirmed through similar processes.

The Islamic System of Governance

A central concept of Islamic political system is that an Islamic ruler must not only enforce Islamic law but also obey it strictly himself. The legitimacy of his rule depends critically on his adherence to the shariah. The structure of Islamic political authority (leadership) is made up of Shura council or consultation with the council presiding over their affairs to elect or appoint leaders as the chairman as done during the early times of the Caliphates Abubakar, Usman, Umar and Ali to succeed Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Since then, this has been the practiced by prominent men of a kinship group, or tribe, to gather after a leader's death and elect a leader from amongst themselves. However, there was no specified procedure or methodology spelt out for the Shura council or Consultative Assembly. The only visible literatures

stated was that candidates are usually from the same age group or lineage with the deceased (leader) and must also not necessarily be the deceased sons. Capable men who would lead well were preferred over an ineffectual direct heir, as there was no basis in the majority (democracy) as currently practice or obtained in our current system of democracy today. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not separate religion from state, and many Muslims argue it is apolitical Islam not political Islam that requires explanation but just order.

Similarly, the Islamic constitutions are derived from the Qur'an, Hadith (deeds of the Prophet) while the Islamic law, Sharia or Ijma (consensus of the opinion) are the responsibilities of the rulers to seek Shura council or consultation from their subjects. In every Muslim community, there exist Islamic political orders (authority) but due to the varying differences in political and religious ideologies, philosophies and contexts of western democracy, the West lump together a large variety of Islamic groups and then called them Islamic Fundamentalist or Militants.

Impacts of Muslims on Politics and Leadership in South-Western Part of Nigeria

Geographically, Yorubaland occupies land which lies on the South-Western part of Nigeria between the third and the sixth degrees of North latitude. It is bounded on the North, and on the East, roughly by the River Niger, on the South, by the Bight of Benin, and on the West, by Dahomey (now the Benin Republic) and

Togo. The Yoruba constitute one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, and the Lagos States and a substantial part of Kwara and Kogi States. A considerable number of Yoruba people also inhabit the South-Eastern part Of the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). All these areas formed what was known as The Yoruba country before the European partition of Africa (Arikewuyo, 2022, p.2).

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation with Christians and Muslims living together as citizens, though Islam predated Christianity in Nigeria. In the South-Western part of the country which is otherwise known as the Yorùbáland, Islam was said to have been introduced into the region from the Empire of Mali during the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa (Opeloye, 2003, p.12). This explains why Islam was referred to as “Imale” and the adherents were described as “Onimale”. The boom in trade and commerce in the empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was instrumental to the spread of Islam in Yorùbáland. By the seventh century, early Muslims were made up of migrants, itinerant merchants and scholars. Major towns in Yorùbáland came in contact with Islam. Namely: Iwo, Iseyin, Lagos, Abeokuta, Saki, and Ilaro, at different times with Mosques springing up accordingly. (Gbadamosi, 2018, pp.2-7)

The Muslim population in the 18th century in Yorùbáland and the religion did not make a meaningful impact on the political scene. Due to the activities of the itinerant Islāmic scholars from North

Africa and the modest effect of some Hausa slaves, Islām enjoyed a peaceful and gradual spread (Gbadamosi, 2018, pp.2-7). During the pre-colonial period, some parts of the Yorùbáland applied Shari‘ah in their dispensation of justice. In Ede, Oba Habibu Lagunju applied Shari‘ah fully in his domain during the second half of the 19th century. The colonial masters were said to have established a court in the town in 1913 whose judge Alufa Sindiku wrote the proceedings in Arabic. Iwo, Oba Muhammadu Lamuye appointed a qadi in his court to adjudge the Shari‘ah provision in cases involving his subjects who were predominantly Muslims. In Ikirun, Oba Aliyu Oyewole the 7th Akinrun appointed a qadi in 1910 who dispensed justice according to the Shari‘ah. (Gbadamosi, 2018, p.5)

The key areas of impact:

Political participation and advocacy

1. Increased political consciousness: As a significant demographic bloc, especially in states like Lagos, Ogun, and Osun, Muslims in the southwest are increasingly politically conscious. The Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) and the Muslim Ummah of Southwest Nigeria (MUSWEN) actively advocate for Muslim rights and political representation.
2. Controversy over religious imbalance: Advocacy groups like MURIC regularly raise concerns about what they perceive as religious imbalance in political appointments.

For example, MURIC recently highlighted that all six southwestern states have been led by Christian governors for an extended period, leading them to call for Muslims to be fielded as gubernatorial candidates in the 2027 elections. This assertive stance reflects a shift from earlier decades, where few committed Muslims were visible in politics.

3. "Muslim-Muslim ticket" debate: The impact of southwestern Muslims on national politics was clearly demonstrated in the 2023 presidential election with the All Progressives Congress (APC) Muslim-Muslim ticket. The victory of President Bola Tinubu, a southwestern Muslim, amid controversy, highlighted the significant influence of the region's Muslim population.

Shaping the political discourse

1. Push for Sharia-compliant laws: Some Muslim leaders and legal experts are advocating for the adoption of Sharia law in family and commercial matters within the southwest. A judge from Kwara State's Shariah court, Justice Abdur-Raheem Ahmad Sayi, argued in February 2025 that the current legal framework in the southwest excludes Muslims from accessing justice in these critical areas.
2. Inter-religious tensions and identity politics: The quest for visibility and

representation in the public sphere has intensified identity politics in the southwest. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) are influential Christian institutions that also assert their interests, leading to a dynamic of religious rivalry and competition for power and resources. This creates an environment where religious considerations can heavily influence voting patterns and public debate.

3. Internal divisions: Despite shared faith, internal fragmentation and ideological differences among Yoruba Muslims have complicated their political representation. For instance, a professor interviewed in a 2025 study highlighted deep divisions across different sects (like Ahmadiyya and NASFAT) and between different ethnic and regional groups. These divisions can at times be exploited by external political actors.

Contributions to socio-political development

1. Education and enlightenment: Muslim organizations like the Nasrul-lahi-l-Fatih Society (NASFAT) have established educational institutions, including Fountain University, to improve the quality of education available to Muslims. These efforts aim to produce Western-educated Muslims who can effectively engage with

modern socio-political challenges while upholding their faith.

2. Economic empowerment: Some Muslim organizations and individuals have contributed to economic development through ventures like cooperatives and Islamic banking initiatives. The goal is to provide economic opportunities for Muslims and contribute to the broader community's welfare. Economic Empowerment: the NASFAT secretariat by this programme seeks employment for unemployed Muslims from various companies using the connection of its members. Within this programme, it also gives soft loans to members who have been inducted on the floating of small scale industries.¹ The Cooperative Society of the group also finances genuine Local Purchase Orders [LPOs] under this scheme.

CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM LEADERS AND POLITICAL ACTORS IN SOUTH WESTERN PART OF NIGERIA

Sa'idu (2017) and Sa'idu, (2016) studied the prominence that Daily Trustnewspaper is giving to the issues of Shari'ah and other matters that touch on the lives of Muslims and Islam as a religion. He content analysed the front page stories, editorials and back page columns of the editions of Daily Trustnewspaper from 2004 to 2014 premised on the fact that Voltmer (2006) established that front page stories and

editorials of newspaper determine its identity. Within the period under study, Daily Trustnewspaper, Sa'idu (2017) said, being a daily title, produced four thousand and fifteen (4,015) editions, if an average of three hundred and sixty five days (365) per year is taking into consideration. He employed systematic sampling in selecting and reviewing one thousand five hundred and fifty eight (1,558) editions of Daily Trustnewspaper, representing 77.61% of the targeted editions (population) of two thousand and seven point five (2,007.5).

Some other includes the followings:

Inter-religious tensions and competition

Perceived "Christian agenda": Many southwestern Muslims and their representative organizations perceive a consistent effort by powerful Christian groups to sideline them from the political mainstream. They cite issues such as the marginalization of Muslims in political appointments, accusations of an "Islamization agenda," and deliberate scheduling of events to coincide with Muslim worship times as evidence of this bias.

"Muslim-Muslim ticket" controversy: The political maneuvering around the 2023 presidential election demonstrated the deep-seated religious divides in the country. The All Progressives Congress (APC)'s Muslim-Muslim ticket led to fierce opposition from

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some Christian leaders and institutions, illustrating the ongoing challenges of religious balancing in Nigerian politics.

Access to justice and legal system

1. Call for Sharia courts: Some Muslim leaders in the southwest are advocating for the establishment of Sharia courts to handle family and commercial matters, citing the current legal system's failure to address their religious needs. This demand can create tension with the Christian community and with secular institutions.
2. Threats against anti-Sharia politicians: Some Muslim clerics have gone so far as to threaten to mobilize their followers against politicians who oppose the establishment of Sharia courts, suggesting the issue is a key point of political friction.

Conclusion

The response of Muslims in the southwestern part of Nigeria to political participation and leadership is deeply rooted in the comprehensive principles of Islam, which not only govern individual conduct but also provide a guiding framework for collective societal engagement. As Islam emphasizes leadership as a sacred trust grounded in justice, accountability, and service to humanity, Muslims in this region navigate political involvement with a strong consciousness of their religious

values. While the political landscape presents challenges inherent in governance, law, economy, security, and social organization, the Muslim community in the Southwest demonstrates a nuanced engagement that balances democratic participation with adherence to Islamic ethical standards.

This dynamic reflects a broader recognition that political leadership and participation are essential means through which Muslims can influence societal development and protect their rights in a pluralistic society. Ultimately, fostering greater political awareness and active involvement among Muslims in the Southwest is vital not only for advancing good governance but also for upholding the principles of religious freedom, social justice, and communal harmony. This synthesis of faith and political agency underscores the evolving nature of Muslim engagement in Nigeria's democratic journey, highlighting an ongoing commitment to contribute meaningfully to the nation's progress while remaining anchored to Islamic teachings.

Recommendation

Muslims in southwestern Nigeria should actively engage in political participation and leadership to protect and advance their interests. Muslim scholars and organizations need to foster unity and provide continuous political education to ensure informed and principled involvement. Establishing dedicated political platforms within Muslim groups will help coordinate efforts and promote

ethical leadership rooted in Islamic values.

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