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UNDER

DEMOCRATIC RULE

(1999 - 2003)

Volume Two



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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Role of Islamic Scholars in Ilorin Politics

I. A. Jawondo

13.1 Introduction

Man is both a religious and political animal. Borne out of an in-depth thinking and observations of things in his environment, man came to the understanding that there exists a supernatural being who controls things that are beyond human comprehension. Thus, he fashioned out ways of worshiping HIM. As man increased in number and lived communally, there was the need to control human behaviour. Thus, the art of governance was evolved. Both, religion and politics are 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, some believe that their marriage is that of inconvenience and therefore, they should be separated. In spite of all this, the two concepts influence each other in all human societies. In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and politics nor all other aspects of life. In fact, Islam has been described as a complete way of life. This chapter examines the influence of religion on the political activities of the people of Ilorin. Ilorin, being a Muslim-dominated town, the activities of the Ulama (the Islamic Scholars) who are the custodians of Islam are considered. This chapter avers that religion and politics are twin sisters that should not be separated. Furthermore, it concludes that the Ilorin Islamic Scholars played inestimable roles in the establishment, nurturing and sustenance of democracy in the first phase of the Fourth Republic.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first part is the introduction while the second is a comparative analysis of the concepts, religion and politics. The third part considers the role of the Islamic scholars in the Ilorin Emirate politics before the Fourth Republic. The fourth part analyses the activities of the Islamic scholars in the Fourth Republic. Lastly, the chapter is concluded in the last section.

13.2 Religion and Politics: Exploring the Nexus

Religion and politics are so involving that there are several supplementary definitions of the terms. The concern here is not the analysis of the different definitions or how they are supplementary to each other, rather it is to examine the goals and functions of religion and politics, which make them inseparable. Religion, essentially, is a means of approaching, worshipping and appeasing God in order to escape His wrath and earn His favour. Adherents of monotheistic religions – Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion – count on God for safety of lives and property, security of territories, victory at war and peaceful co-existence in the society¹. On the other hand, politics is about seeking and exercising power².

In Nigeria, many people have continuously expressed the opinion that religion should be separated from politics. To them, religion and politics are two separate concepts and any attempt to marry them would always cause commotion. Some Christians believe that politics is for Caesar and religion for God. The proponents of this view believe that politics in Nigeria is a dirty game characterised by wasteful spending, nepotism, tribalism and sectionalism, in which no worthy Christian should participate. This view is not limited to some Christians. Some voiceless Muslims also share it. However, some scholars have challenged this view that the dirtiness of Nigerian politics is brought about by the absence of the clergy in politics, who are supposed to take religion into politics to bring about a healthy political culture as opposed to the introduction of politics into religion, which has resulted into the present political, social, religious and economic problems in Nigeria³.

Islam transcends the borders of being a mere religion. Rather, it is a complete way of life⁴. Thus, politics, which is just an aspect of human endeavours, is not left out. The Prophet of Islam was all-in-all to the Muslims, so also were the companions during their lifetimes. They were religious and political leaders of the Muslim State and commanders-in-chief of the Muslim soldiers⁵. Thus, in Islam, emphasis is placed on purposeful and honest leadership as a means of attaining peace in the society.

At this juncture, it is important to stress that the attributes of God from all the monotheistic religion show that God is the custodian of both religions and politics which He institutionalised in human society. 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 God⁶. Leaders are therefore accountable not only to men but also to God. Their subjects oblige them more importantly for reasons of religion, which compel them to obey constituted authority⁷.

Consequently, if these are the features of religion and politics, 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 value, which is the bedrock of religion often appeal to the conscience of the politician to arrive at more rational decisions that are capable of promoting national survival⁸.

13.3 Islamic Scholars and Ilorin Politics: The Antecedents

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 Ilorin⁹.

Scholars in Ilorin since the establishment of the Emirate system in 1823 had 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 councillors 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 either their choice when 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)¹⁰. 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.

As from 1895, there was 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 imperialists. The scholars then provided a strong base for the defence of the Emirate against the British colonialists 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 Resident. The adoption of Indirect Rule system put the Emir at the helm of affairs in the Emirate and so 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.

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 Muslims¹¹. 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. They, apart from having the control over the dominant Muslims, 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 brain 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 Authority¹². The group aligned with the Action Group Party of Nigeria and won elections in 1956 and 1957 in Ilorin Emirate¹³. 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 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 Islamic scholars in Ilorin Emirate politics has been on the increase. Successive governments in Kwara state reached out to them for one assistance or the other.

13.4 Islamic Scholars and Ilorin Politics Under the Fourth Republic

Islamic scholars in 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 all the renowned scholars in the Emirate. By the close of the 20th century, the scholars have 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 co-ordinators in their wards that were chosen from the *ratibi Imams* in their quarters.

These co-ordinators are 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 co-ordinators as it enabled them have full control over their areas. The principal Imams held meetings with the co-ordinators 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 Islamic 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, so also did Ilorin scholars prepare the masses for the Fourth Republic. The scholars did this through persistent heart-piercing sermons in the media, at Islamic and social functions, *Jummat* and *Eid* prayers, as well as designated preaching centres.

The scholars, most of who were professional preachers, attracted large audience at their preaching centres on ordinary days. During the Ramadan period, 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 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. This call by the Islamic 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), All Peoples Party (APP), now All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD) and their flag-bearers to win active supporters 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 presence at their sermons, to seek financial assistance to renovate old or build new Mosques, Quranic schools or purchase materials for use in the Mosques and schools. Parties' responses to these demands usually determined who won at the polls. Those that responded to the financial needs of the scholars either as groups or individuals usually benefited from the spiritual powers of the scholars. It could be inferred that the presence of moneybags in the APP who paid the desired tribute to the scholars in Ilorin was 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. Uztaz AbdulRasaq Aduagba admonishing the political leaders said:

Whatever a leader does on the position of authority, time shall tell¹⁴. All of you are leaders (The elected the electorate) and you shall be made to account for your stewardship before the community and Allah¹⁵.

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

Consequently, in order to sustain and improve upon the rapport between the scholars and the government, government reciprocated the gestures of the scholars through different means. Indeed, some scholars were given cars, *hajj* tickets, contracts, cows and rams and a host of other things during Islamic festivals¹⁶. However, barely after two years, disagreements occurred within the APP, which was the ruling party in the state. It started between the Governor, Alhaji Muhammad Lawal and his political godfather, Dr Abubakar Olusola Saraki. It later spread like bush fire among the rank and file of the party in the state and beyond. It is difficult for one to establish the cause of the rancour but oral sources believe that the issue of second term in office had strained their relationship¹⁷. No wonder then that Shaikh Kamaludden Al-Adabiy admonished them that the two camps should beware, that power belongs to Allah and He gives it to whomever He likes¹⁸.

As a result, the party became factionalised into Lawal and Saraki groups. According to oral sources, vindictive steps were taken by government against the loyalists of Saraki who held positions in government and they were subsequently removed from office¹⁹. Some of the affected officers were Barrister Kayode Elesinla and Alhaja Nimota Ibrahim who were commissioners for Education and Women Affairs respectively²⁰. Political thugs were recruited and armed to oppress and attack supporters of each group. This led to loss of lives and property. Given this lawless situation, the scholars, through their preaching, called for order, peace and

harmony among the leaders and the society at large²¹. They reminded them that God is not at peace with those whose brothers' lives and property are not safe from atrocities, and that life is sacred and should not be taken unjustly²².

Furthermore, series of arbitration groups such as Shaikh Kamaluddeen, Justice Saidu Kawu and Justice Mustapha Akanbi - led committees were formed to settle the rancour between the two parties²³. Unfortunately, the committees could not achieve peace²⁴. The crisis deepened as it attained an ethnic dimension; Yoruba, particularly the Aare family, versus the royal Fulani.

Oral sources believed 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 cause²⁵. However, it is important to stress here that the issue of tribalism was not important in the political crisis of the Fourth Republic in Ilorin. Rather, personality clash 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.

In fact, some scholars were on the side of the Lawal-led government while some were on the side of the opposition group led by Dr Saraki within the same party. It is important to stress that rather than use the tribal factor to describe the attitude of those scholars, financial and other 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 killed²⁶. This made the police to declare curfew in Ilorin. The curfew, which was between 6pm and 6am, affected the religious obligations of the Muslims. Many Muslims could not go to Mosques to perform the dawn and dusk prayers. This incidence agitated the minds of scholars and so rather than appealing to the warring parties for peace, they appealed to God to bring peace to Ilorin at whatever cost²⁷. Series of prayers and sacrifices were offered to God individually and collectively, covertly and overtly, within and outskirts of the town to bring about peace in Ilorin. Prominent scholars of Ilorin descent, resident elsewhere, were not left out in the prayers to bring about peace in Ilorin.

These prayers were generally believed to have brought about a change of the 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 elections results, the thematic concern of the scholars changed from appeal to God for peace to showering of praises and thanks to God for bringing peace. This, therefore, alludes to the assertion that the exit of the leadership of Alhaji Muhammad Lawal was the handiwork of the scholars because he was judged to be oppressive and tyrannical, not only to co-politicians

but to the masses, who were not the cause of the problem but bore the brunt of the conflict. On 7th August, 2003, a special prayer was organized and offered to Allah at Ilorin *Eid* praying ground by the Ilorin Emirate scholars to appreciate return of peace to Ilorin. Prayer was also said for the new Governor and members of his cabinet²⁸.

Furthermore, congratulatory messages to the incumbent Governor, Dr 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 Ilorin back to its former glory as the home of peace²⁹.

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 gains³⁰. This is not to say that there were no scholars who were observed to be partisan. In fact, there were. Most of them enriched themselves and their reputation as scholars suffered for it.

13.5 Conclusion

The Muslim scholars who are indigenes of Ilorin, through their age-long tradition of Islamic leadership in the Emirate, are highly revered by the people of the Emirate who are Muslims. The fact that they are held in high esteem gives them influence over the Emirate Muslims. 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/government, the politicians/government catered for the welfare of the scholars in cash and kind. However, the relationship between the two parties got strained as a result of misrule, loss of lives and property that characterised the Fourth Republic in Ilorin, as a result of internal crisis within the ANPP. All attempts by the scholars to restore normalcy failed. This, therefore, informed the extensive and intensive prayers by scholars in Ilorin, and this, sources believed, led to the change of government in 2003.

Endnotes

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