

Engagement of Muslim Women in Governance and Public Administration: The Ilorin Emirate Experience

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Abstract: Muslim women through the ages have contributed immensely to the socio-political and economic development of various societies. Considerable number of Muslim women had in the past decades involved actively in the governance of their nations. This study focuses on the status and role of Muslim women in democratic governance and public administration in Ilorin Emirate, Kwara State of Nigeria from 1999-2007. Since 1999, when democracy recommenced in Nigeria, few Muslim women in Ilorin Emirate have emerged as commissioners, board members and functionaries in other public sphere. It argues that Muslim women's involvement in governance and in the conduct of public life has a great deal of impact on the improvement of their social position and the process of their empowerment. It submits with certain suggestions towards enhancing the performance of Muslim women in governance and public administration in the Emirate.

Key words: Muslim, women, democratic, governance, public and administration

INTRODUCTION

Governance and public administration are not alien to Islam. As far as Islam is concerned, the duos are very fundamental issues. They are amanah, trust, heavy responsibilities and serious obligations i.e., fard kifayah, which are always linked with iyman, morality and a sense of accountability (Muhammad, 2003). The Holy Qur'an condemns anarchy and disorder (Q2: 205) and the Prophet (SAW) stressed the need for governance and public administration in society (Moten, 1996). The Khulafa al-Rashidun and their companions recognized that the divinely mandated vocation to realize the will of Allah in history was communal as well as individual. They held an organic, holistic approach to life in which Islam was intimately intertwined with governance and public administration, law and society. This is well expressed by Ka'b, as quoted by Ibn Qutaybah, saying:

Islam, the government and the people are like the tent, the pole, the ropes and the pegs. The tent is Islam; the pole is the government; the ropes and pegs are the people. None will do without the others (Qutaybah, 1976).

Nigeria, one of the most populous African countries, has the highest Muslim percentage of her population. Religious scholars, particularly church historians and African Christian theologians have done significant studies on Christian women in politics. It is regrettably that although there is a significant presence of Muslim women in Nigeria, but no serious academic focus has been given to their significance and relevance in Nigerian

politics (Ogungbile, 2004). In fact, considerable numbers of Muslim women through the ages had involved and continue to engage in the governance and public administration of their societies. These attest to the various injunctions in the Qur'an, which improve the status of women in a wide range of public and private spheres (Hassan, 2000). It is within this context that this study sets out to examine the involvement of Muslim women in governance and public administration in Ilorin Emirate of Nigeria during the fourth republic, using the period of 1999-2007 as the basis.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In order to put the focus of this study in its appropriate context, some concepts deserve clarification. These include Governance and Public Administration.

Governance is generally defined as the activity of governing a country or controlling a company or an organization (Hornby, 2000). The World Bank (1992) sees governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social development while Boeninger (1991) simply defines governance as good government of society (which) guides a country along a course leading to a desired goal-in this case development.

Public Administration on the other hand, means the practice of administration in a particular segment of society; that of the public sector. According to Adebayo (1997), public administration is a governmental administration and operates in the particular sphere of government. He also sees it as the machinery for implementing government policy.

From the foregoing, it is logical to deduce that social stability rests on governance and public administration. This stems from the fact that the duo ensures the establishment of institutional processes and machinery through which the function of the state is carried out from day to day. In the state (be it Islamic, multi-religious or secular), institutional machineries like judiciary, the legislative, regulatory commissions, the civil service, etc. are set up to ensure the smooth working of the various components that make up the state (Adebayo, 1997).

REFLECTION ON THE ROLE AND STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

For many Islamic and Western scholars of Islam, the status, role and position of women are important distinguishing features of Muslim societies that set them apart from their western counterparts. Many people in the West regard the status of women in Muslim society as symptomatic of their oppression in Islam (Esposito, 1995). It is further argues that gender relations in Islam have been shaped primarily by their Arabian origins. While Islam has borne the marks of its Arabian origin throughout its history, in regard to the position held by women in his community, Prophet Muhammed was able to introduce profound changes (Levy, 1972; Ali, 1970; Hassan, 2000).

Watt (1991) looked at the position of women in the earliest Islam and pointed to the fact that the culture of the pre-Islamic Arabian community had no regard for women, but that the position of women was improved at various points by Prophet Muhammad. For instance, the pre-Islamic Arabia had a marital arrangement, which was associated with the social system that may be described as limited and unlimited polyandry. However, with the emergence of Islam, this situation essentially changed as a woman was to have sexual relations with only one man at a time and divorce or change of partner was not encouraged. It is also important to note that although polygamy was allowed, it would be acceptable on the condition that the husband would act justly towards several wives, otherwise, only one wife was recommended (Qur'an 4: 3). Islam was instrumented in introducing wide ranging legal religious enactments to improve the status and position of women in Arabian society and protect them from male excesses. There are numerous Qur'anic injunctions to give effect to these charges (Ali, 1970). These injunctions brought above significant improvements in the status of women in a wide range of public and privates spheres, including politics.

It is a truism that the Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet) considerably, improved

women's status by comparison to the pre-Islam (Jahiliyah) period. Before Islam, men treated women as their property, to be married or divorced at their pleasure. Women are subjected to polygamous practices and female children to infanticide. Women generally had no voice in the selection of spouses and once married, lacked financial security, as the dower (mahr) was paid directly to their male guardians. However, Islamic law addresses some of the more flagrant gender inequalities of the pre-Islam period (Hoffman-Ladd, 1985). It is interesting to note that apart from the fact that Islam recognises Aisha to have played an important part in the early years of Islam (Bowker, 1997), Prophet Muhammad gave a deep honour to women and mothers as he was noted to have answered when asked a question on "whom one should most honour, he replied 3 times, 'Your mother' and only then added, 'Your father'" (Bowker, 1997). Thus and generally speaking as Nasr (1995) submitted that the role of women is seen as being more in the preservation of the family and upbringing of children.

MUSLIM WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Ilorin Emirate was established in 1823. By the 20th century, all the Muslims from different ethnic groups who settled in Ilorin, had to a large extent, been integrated socio-politically and economically into a nascent and developing culture of the emirate (Ayinla, 2005). The Emirate covers four Local Government areas in Kwara State, namely: Asa with headquarters at Afon, Ilorin East, with headquarters at Oke Oyi, Ilorin West with headquarters within Ilorin city and Moro with headquarters at Bode Sa'adu (Badmus, 1995).

The people of Ilorin Emirate are traditionally Muslims while Islam has become a cultural and ideological stronghold in the Emirate; it is a unifying factor among the people of the community in spite of their political differences. As at today, the development of Islam in Ilorin Emirate manifests in the socio-economic and political life of the people. Islam continues to play prominent roles in the social and political behaviour of the people. This has been the motivational factor for women involvement in governance and public administration in the community.

The fact that Muslim women in Ilorin engage in governance and public administration of the emirate is not in doubt. Few Muslim women in Ilorin have emerged as commissioners, board members and functionaries in other public sphere. These positions have had a great deal of impact on the improvement of their social position and the process of their empowerment. Besides, they

participate as voters, party supporters and usually attend political rallies in large numbers. They listen to political speeches and are exposed to all manner of campaign propaganda from politicians. As a matter of fact, the majority of electorates in the Emirate are Muslim women, especially the aged.

At the inception of the Governor Muhammed Lawal administration on 29 May 1999, a couple of women were appointed into political offices. Though this action indicated an upward trend in women's involvement in the state's political process, the fact however remains that there is no significant increase in the number of Muslim women who contested for both elective posts and those who were appointed into decision making positions.

A cursory look at the Emirate's political terrain during the administration of Bukola Saraki (2003-2007) shows an upsurge of Muslim women who are actively engaged in governance and public administration. At the inception of Bukola administration on 29 May 2003, a couple of Muslim women were appointed into public offices while some are hard-core members of political parties in the Emirate. In addition, out of more than 15 appointments into state parastatals and government agencies, only a handful of Muslim women benefited from this largesse. Some of them are: Alhaja Nimota Ibrahim-Commissioner for Local Government, Alhaja Oba Sulaiman-Commissioner for Women Affairs and Alhaja Ayo Ibrahim-member of Governing Council, Kwara State College of Education, Oro.

One may also state that the present administration has tried in encouraging all local governments in the Emirate to appoint a few numbers of Muslim women as council officials. Examples abound: Alhaja Ramota Oganija-Supervisory Councillor for Health Ilorin West Local Government and Alhaja Amuda Onimago- Secretary UBE Ilorin West Local Government etc. Currently, the following Muslim women engage in governance and public administration within the Ilorin Emirate. They include: Alhaja Ayinke Saka-Commissioner of Health, Miss Ramat Tolu Moito-S.A Domestic to the Governor, Dr (Hajia) Zainab Ambali-Permanent Secretary Ministry of Education and Hajia Ajiun Ajia-Permanent Secretary Designate etc.

Some women from Ilorin Emirate are also representing their various constituencies from the Emirate at both the national and state levels. For examples, Senator Ruqayat Gbemisola Saraki, representing Kwara central senatorial district, Hajia Nimota Sulaiman-Ilorin West/Asa constituency House of Representatives, Hajia Ramota Adesina Abaya-Owode/Onire constituency, Kwara State House of Assembly and Hajia R. A. Aladifa, Bode Saadu

constituency KWHHA, Arch. Halimat T. Alao-Hon. Minister for Environment and Dr (Hajia) Nimota Akanbi (immediate former Principal of Queen's college)-Ambassador designate.

Deriving from the foregoing, it should be argued that Muslim women's involvement in governance and public administration has a great deal of impact on the improvement of their social position and the process of their empowerment within the Islamic framework.

THE CHALLENGES

There are several challenges, which pose as constraints to active engagement of Muslim women in governance and public administration in Ilorin Emirate and other Muslim societies. The first one is discriminatory socio-cultural practices, which some Muslim men consciously or unconsciously practice against women. These negative socio-cultural practices manifest in the political behaviour of these male politicians in the first part of fourth republic. As a result of these negative attitudes towards Muslim women participation in public affairs, many potentially qualified ones were shielded away from governance in the fourth republic, despite the steady though slow growth in the number of educated Muslim women in the Emirate.

Negative attitudes of Muslim women towards politics also constitute an impediment to few courageous women who aspire to elective political positions. Some Muslim women have misconceived notions on the Islamic position on women involvement in public life. These misconceived notions have greatly affected their active participation in governance.

Monetisation of the political process by the political class is another major impediment to Muslim women's participation in governance. Available evidence shows that monetisation of the political process during the first path of first republic served as a disincentive to the participation of Muslim women in contesting for elective offices in the existing political parties as well as executive and legislative positions.

The violent nature of politics in Ilorin, which was amply demonstrated in the second republic and first path of fourth republic, also pose as an obstacle to Muslim women's engagement in governance. Ayinla (2005) observed that during the fourth republic, the political climate was characterized by wave of violent conflicts. Given the general abhorrence of women for violence, many Muslim women were discouraged from political participation. This in part affected their active engagement in governance and public administration.

Watt (1991) looked at the position of women in the earliest Islam and pointed to the fact that the culture of the pre-Islamic Arabian community had no regard for women, but that the position of women was improved at various points by Prophet Muhammad. For instance, the pre-Islamic Arabia had a marital arrangement, which was associated with the social system that may be described as limited and unlimited polyandry. However, with the emergence of Islam, this situation essentially changed as a woman was to have sexual relations with only one man at a time and divorce or change of partner was not encouraged. It is also important to note that although polygamy was allowed, it would be acceptable on the condition that the husband would act justly towards several wives, otherwise, only one wife was recommended (Qur'an 4: 3).

It is noteworthy that the Qur'an enjoins the equality of men and women. It is interesting to note that apart from the fact that Islam recognises Aisha to have played an important part in the early years of Islam (Bowker, 1997), Prophet Muhammad gave a deep honour to women and mothers as he was noted to have answered when asked a question on "whom one should most honour, he replied three times, 'Your mother' and only then added, 'Your father'" (Bowker, 1997). Thus and generally speaking as Nasr (1995) submitted that the role of women is seen as being more in the preservation of the family and upbringing of children.

It may be wrong to assert a uniformity of the status and role of Muslim women in Nigeria as a whole. The reason is obvious. The cultures and religious worldviews of the southern and northern Nigeria are distinct. Thus, the status and role of women in the two regions need to be seen and viewed differently. Our attempt here is not a detailed treatment of the subject, but a cursory look at the religious atmospheres. Islam had contact with Hausa-land about the eleventh century but gained prominence in the fifteenth century. There, as Imam (1994) noted "Islamic influence and political power came to be strongly associated". As Islam gained prominence among the ruling groups and rich merchants, the practice of seclusion of women became a status symbol and women's formal roles began to lack recognition. During the colonial period, seclusion was used as a means of resistance, most especially against the British colonial authority's heavy taxation. Thus, there was an adaptation of local customs of the Bori into Islam to produce a different kind of identity, which was designated Hausa-cum-Islamic identity. The point being made here is that women occupy a somewhat hidden status and roles. In the 1980s, as Muslim women began to recognise the effect of seclusion on their political and social rights, they conceived the idea of forming themselves into groups. A branch of such groups, which was probably formed outside the northern

region, was formed in one of the States of Northern Nigeria. This group is the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) which tries to "redefine Islamic discourses on women while maintaining legitimacy with existing religious and state authorities" (Imam, 1997). Commentators and writers on Muslim women have always emphasised, from the Qur'an and the hadith, issues relating only to marital relations and injunctions on women. Their roles and status in religious administration and leadership were usually seen more as a subjective vessel, to both human and divine ordinances.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the participation of Muslim women in governance and public administration in Ilorin Emirate of Nigeria during the fourth republic (1999-2007). It was discovered that Muslim women engagement in governmental institutions during the period under discussion was encouraging. Some inhibiting factors, which affect their engagement, were equally identified. These include misconception on the Islamic stance on politics, discriminatory social practices, negative attitudes of Muslim women, monetisation of political process and violent nature of politics in the Emirate.

In order to improve the level of Muslim women participation in governance and public administration in this political dispensation and beyond, it is hereby appropriate to make the following recommendations.

Firstly, efforts must be made by the various Muslim women associations to campaign intensively in Ilorin Emirate to break the stereotypes of women's public roles vis-à-vis men. Muslim women groups like Alaslatu and FOMWAN through systematic campaigns can create grass-root constituencies for change, which will ultimately empower Muslim women for participation in politics.

Secondly, the physical battles for which often accompany political contests in Ilorin Emirate must be addressed to ensure that Muslim women participate in governance in this Islamic community. It is a truism that a peaceful political atmosphere in the Emirate would assist in the motivation of Muslim women for participating in governance and public administration.

Thirdly, it is suggested that politically inclined Muslim women associations must assist in providing a conducive cultural environment for Muslim women's participation in governance and public administration. These organizations should also correct the erroneous notions of some Muslim women on the Islamic stance on politics generally. In addition, Muslim women must be empowered educationally so that they can be relevant to governance and public administration in the society.

Finally, the principles of fundamental human rights of women as dictated in Islam should be promoted and protected to ensure the integration and full engagement of Muslim women in governance and public administration.

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