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**Islam and the Political Arena in Nigeria:  
The Ulama and the 2007 Elections**

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## Islam and the Political Arena in Nigeria: The *Ulama* and the 2007 Elections

Haruna Wakili

### Abstract

This essay discusses the role of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in the 2007 Nigerian elections. Based on interviews and the political activities and statements of twelve members of the *ulama*, most of whom are from Kano, the author observes four areas of consensus among these scholars: 1) The compatibility of Islam and democratic politics; 2) The imperative of the *ulama*'s participation in politics; 3) The importance of Muslims' participation in the electoral process, especially in resisting attempts at fraud or intimidation at the polls; and 4) The urgency to vote for the most credible candidate regardless of political affiliation and perhaps even religious disposition. Political and religious affiliations, and even the implementation of *sharia*, were secondary, while the emphasis was placed on the candidates' character and personality. In believing that their active participation could help "sanitize" the public space, Islamic scholars indicate a shift from the period prior to 1999, when a popular view was that they should reject—and overthrow if possible—the secular state. The author concludes that an interesting dialogue between Islam and democracy is taking place in Nigeria's public sphere, and Nigerians must face the challenge of determining how to accommodate religion and religious actors in the country's democratic space.

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## Introduction

In May 1999 Nigeria returned to democratic rule and since then the country's political arena has become vibrant. Several significant political issues have surfaced: the revival of *sharia*, the debate over resource control, proliferation of political parties, the anti-corruption campaign, economic reforms, ethno-religious conflicts, President Obasanjo's unsuccessful bid for a third term, the personality conflict between President Obasanjo and his Vice Atiku Abubakar, and the spate of impeachment etc. Of all these issues, the *sharia* legal system and the role of religion in Nigeria's politics became more attractive to scholars and observers of Nigeria's political scene. This essay examines the major expressions of Islam in Nigeria's political arena through the increasing political involvement of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and Muslim activists in the governance of the country. Specifically, the essay seeks answers to three major questions regarding the role played by the *ulama* in the run-up to Nigeria's general elections of April 2007. First, what role have the *ulama* played in mobilizing Muslim voters for 2007 elections? Second, what are the issues raised by the *ulama* in the electoral campaigns? Third, what media did the *ulama* use to mobilize Muslim voters towards the elections?

## Islam and the Political Arena in Nigeria: Context and Background

The word *ulama* is the plural of the Arabic word *al-‘alim*, which means “the learned one” or scholar or “the possessor of knowledge.” Historically, the term refers to the intelligentsia in Islamic societies, regarded as repositories of knowledge, enlightenment, guidance and education for members of the society through Islamic schools, sermons in mosques and general proselytizing. Some *ulama* played active roles in administration, governance, and politics by serving as judges, advisers, interpreters, clerks, administrators and in the shaping of public opinion. In addition to providing ritual, spiritual and religious services to the Muslims in all aspects of their individual and public lives, the *ulama* have also played critical roles in commerce and trade.

The ascendancy of *ulama* in the public sphere has been evolving over several centuries of the history of Muslim communities of present day Nigeria. Two major historical events, the nineteenth century Usman Dan Fodio *jihad* and the twentieth-century British conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate, Borno and their neighbors, are particularly relevant for understanding the roles of the *ulama* in society. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, a section of the *ulama* under the leadership of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio waged a *jihad* aimed at reforming the society in Hausaland. The *jihad* resulted in the establishment of an Islamic State later known as the Sokoto Caliphate. Its Islamic legacy has remained politically salient in the public affairs of Nigeria in both the colonial and post-colonial periods, particularly because Muslims still look up to the historic roles of the *ulama* in the Sokoto Caliphate as the model of what should be the roles of the *ulama* in contemporary Nigeria. Since limited space does not allow detailed examination here, I refer the reader to relevant literature (Adeleye 1971; Last 1977; Naniya 1991; Sokoto 1983).

Among the consequences of colonialism relevant here are the British tampering with the application of *sharia* through the so-called colonial reforms of the judiciary, and curbing the influence of *ulama* in the society. The introduction of western education resulted in government personnel versed in English and Hausa language using the Roman alphabet--a development that made the *ulama* virtually illiterate in spite of their literacy in Arabic and *ajami* (African languages written in the Arabic alphabet). Consequently, the *ulama* became marginalized and alienated from government and politics under colonialism. Instead,

Muslims with western education became the new dominant elite who inherited power from the British at the end of the colonial rule in 1960.

Although Islam ceased to be a state religion during the colonial era, it has continued to play significant roles in the political and social life of the Muslim-dominated areas of Nigeria. It needs to be stated here that Nigeria is religiously mixed, with Islam and Christianity as the dominant religions followed by African Traditional Religion in some areas of the country. Paden (1973) and Kukah (1993) demonstrated that during the era of decolonization and early independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the two major political parties in Northern Nigeria, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and Northern Elements' Progressive Union (NEPU) became associated with the two dominant Islamic brotherhoods: *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya* respectively. Both political parties used the extensive networks provided by the brotherhoods for political mobilization of the masses. Again, Usman (1987) Ibrahim (1991) and Kukah (1993) have documented how religion and religious sentiments were manipulated for political gains in the Second Republic (1979-1983). The manipulation of religion in the 1970s and 1980s manifested itself in many ways such as the *sharia* debate in the constituent assemblies of 1976/77 and 1987/88, religious violence in Kano (1980 and 1982) and Kaduna (1987), the increasing political campaigns in churches and mosques as well as the rising religio-political activities of religious organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), *Jama'atul Nasril Islam* (JNI) and the Council of Ulama of Nigeria, among others.

However, in more recent years the *ulama* have increasingly regained societal roles and influence they might have lost under colonial rule. In particular, the impact of the economic crisis and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) of the 1980s-1990s, leading to decline in state provision of basic services (Jega 1996), has heightened religiosity, which in turn has enhanced and expanded the roles and influence of the *ulama*. Given their religious knowledge and spiritual authority, the *ulama* are believed to possess powers not available to ordinary people. Hence their prayers and charms are sought as sources of fortune, blessing, and sometimes, mischief. Thus, members of the general public, as well as the ruling classes, often consult the *ulama* or seek their prayers and blessings for success in their chosen endeavors. These developments have changed the perceptions and roles of the *ulama* in public affairs. Prior to 1999 the *ulama* generally tried to be neutral in partisan politics.

### **The *Ulama* and Democratic Governance Since 1999**

Perceiving politics as a game, which is not and should not be the business of men of God, the *ulama* used to stay away from it (Shaykh Ibrahim Khalil, Interview, April 10, 2007). However, following restoration of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the *ulama* began to actively participate in politics and governance. In 2000, Zamfara State Government introduced judicial reforms expanding the jurisdiction of *sharia*, thereby starting a wave that other state governments had to follow. The pressure and demand for the restoration of "full" *sharia* came from the masses. As soon as the *sharia* was restored in Zamfara State, ordinary Muslims across the eleven Northern States agitated and pressured their elected representatives and Governors via the *ulama* to emulate the steps taken by Governor Ahmed Sani Yariman Bakura of Zamfara State. Governor Adamu Muazu of Bauchi once confessed that, "in all states of Nigeria where the *sharia* was introduced, it is the wishes of the people that were satisfied. In Bauchi State for example, the majority of the citizens want the *sharia* introduced. As we are in a democracy the government had no alternative" (Muazu 2004). Governor Ibrahim Shekarau of Kano State also said that "the implementation of *sharia* in Nigeria has always been the major aspiration of the Muslim electorate in all the Muslim

majority states and we must not lose sight of the fact that democracy is all about responding to the yearnings of the electorate” (Shekarau 2004). But who led the agitation for the *sharia* restoration? In Zamfara, and to some extent Niger State, it was the Governors of the two States and members of the Houses of Assembly. But in other States, like Kano, Bauchi and Jigawa, it was the *ulama* who really championed the struggle for *sharia* restoration. However, these *ulama* are not the same as those of the pre-colonial era.

The educational changes introduced British colonial authorities led to the emergence of modern *ulama*. In contrast to the traditional *ulama* educated in the old Quranic schools, the modern *ulama* are educated in the newly established Arabic and Islamic Schools, Higher Islamic Schools, Colleges and Universities (CDRT Report 2005). In contemporary Nigeria, the modern *ulama* largely served as teachers, judges, preachers and Imams. Mahmud (2004: 88) and Muazzam (2005:21) observe that the introduction and implementation of *sharia* is not the handiwork of “traditional” Islamic scholars but it was largely championed by a new generation of relatively younger and technocratic Islamists claiming to be representing the larger (but marginalized) Muslim majority. The strategies used to convince the politicians to implement the *sharia* included private contact and subtle pressure on the political class, open air lectures, media campaigns, and in some cases protest and demonstrations.

In all the States where the *sharia* has been implemented, the *ulama* are constructively and positively engaged in the process of governance in various ways. First, some *ulama* and Muslim activists are appointed as Commissioners or Advisers and Special Assistants to the State Governors. Second, the *ulama* dominated the institutions and agencies charged with managing and overseeing the *sharia* implementation such as the *sharia* Commission, Zakat and *Hubs*i Commission, *Hisbah* Board, and the *sharia* Implementation Committee. Furthermore, the experience *ulama* gained in the struggle for the restoration of the *sharia* from 2000 to 2002 gradually resulted in their increasing involvement and active participation in the current democratic political process.

During the 2003 General Elections the *ulama* in Kano supported, and some of them openly campaigned for “one” of them—Malam Ibrahim Shekarau—to become the Governor of Kano State under the platform of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). They supported Shekarau on the firm belief that under his leadership, the *sharia* would be vigorously enforced in the State. Since Shekarau won the Governorship contest in 2003 the *ulama* have become deeply involved in running his government. For example, all the three major institutions responsible for the implementation of the *sharia* in Kano State are placed under the leadership of influential and respected *ulama*, namely: Sheikh Ibrahim Umar Kabo, former University lecturer as Chairman of Council of *Ulama* of Nigeria; Muhammad Sani Zahradeen, a Professor of Islamic Studies and former Vice-Chancellor of Bayero University as the Zakat and *Hubs*i Commission; and Sheikh Yahaya Farouk Chedi, a Lecturer in Department of Arabic, Bayero University as the Commander General of the *Hisbah* Board.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the membership of the governing boards of these agencies is dominated by the leading *ulama* in Kano drawn from all Islamic groups and brotherhoods. Governor Shekarau established a Consultative Forum (*Shura* Committee) largely composed of Islamic scholars that he consults from time to time on policy matters. The Shekarau administration in Kano

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<sup>1</sup> On September 3, 2007 Governor Shekarau announced the reconstitution of five major *Sharia* implementation Institutions to be led by the following: Professor M.S. Zahradeen (*Sharia* Commission), Professor Ibrahim Umar ( Zakat Commission), Sheikh Isa Waziri (*Shura* Consultative Committee), Sheikh Ibrahim Abubakar Ramadan (Pilgrims Welfare Board), and Ustaz Ibrahim Muazzam Maibushira (*Hisbah* Board).

State is a constitutional democratic government, but driven by Islamic ideals and dominated by Islamic scholars.

### **The *Ulama* and 2007 General Elections**

Nigeria's 2007 general elections were a landmark in the nation's history, through which a transfer of power from one civilian administration to another occurred for the first time. With a great political anxiety and expectation, fifty registered political parties participated. Officially, the political parties commenced electioneering campaigns in January, 2007, but long before this date, some leading Islamic scholars expressed their opinions on the elections via their sermons, preaching sessions, public lectures and seminars in mosques, schools and the media. They mobilized people on who to elect into various posts. To capture and present the views of the *ulama* on the April 2007 elections, twelve influential *ulama* were selected and their views prior to the elections monitored and documented for the purpose of this study. Out of the twelve *ulama* sampled, ten are based in Kano and one each based in Kaduna and Abuja. The choice of Kano with the highest number of study subjects is based on several considerations: Kano has been the centre of political activism in the country and the government of Kano since 2003 has been dominated by Islamic scholars and Muslim activists more than other state governments in the country. The identities of the selected *ulama* are summarized in the table on the following page:

**Table 1: List of Islamic scholars whose views on 2007 elections were monitored**

S/No.	Name of Scholar	Religious/political Affiliation	Major Activity/ Position
1.	Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil	Ahl Sunna/ Supporter of Governor Ibrahim Shekarau	Preaching & Key member of the Sharia Implementation Committee, Kano State
2.	Sheikh Ibrahim Umar Kabo	Ahl Sunna/Supporter of Governor Ibrahim Shekarau	Chair, Sharia Commission and National Leader of the Council of Ulama of Nigeria
3	Sheikh Muktari Attama	Qadiriyya Brotherhood/Supporter of Governor Shekarau	Imam, University lecturer and member, Sharia Implementation Committee, Kano state
4	Sheikh Mahmoud Mudi Salga	Tijaniyya Brotherhood/Supporter of Governor Shekarau	Preaching and National Leader of Fityanul Islam of Nigeria
5.	Sheikh Yahaya Tanko	Ahl Sunna/ Supporter of Governor Ibrahim Shekarau	Imam, Commissioner II, Zakat and Hubsu Commission and a University Lecturer
6.	Shaykh Yahaya Farouk Chedi	Ahl Sunna/ Supporter of Ibrahim Shekarau	Commander-General, Hisbah Board, Kano State and University Lecturer
7.	Sheikh Jafar Mahmud Adam <sup>2</sup>	Izala-Salafiyya/ Supporter of PDP	Preaching and Chief Imam of Dorayi Juma'at Mosque, Kano
8.	Malam Abdullahi Salihu Aikawa	Ahl Sunna/Supporter of Ibrahim Shekarau	Leader of Jama'atul Tajdidil Islam, Kano State
9.	Sheikh Abubakar Rijiyar Lemo	Izala-Salafiya Movement/PDP Supporter	Chief Imam of Rijiyar Lemo Juma'at Mosque (Kandahar)
10.	Dr. Ahmad Mahmud Gumi	Izala	Key figure in the Izala movement, Kaduna
11.	Sheikh Safiyanu Abdullahi	Izala	Chief Imam of Area 11 Friday Mosque, Abuja
12.	Sheikh Abba Adam Koki	Izala/PDP Supporter	Leader of Salafiyyah movement in Kano

<sup>2</sup> Assassinated in Kano while leading early morning prayers on Friday April 13, 2007, a day to the Governorship and State Assembly Elections.

Clearly the *ulama* selected for this study have diverse affiliations in both religious and political matters. Broadly, ten out of twelve selected *ulama* belong to non-Sufi movements (Izala, Salafiya or Sunni) and the remaining two scholars belong to Sufi brotherhoods. Again, the political orientation of the *ulama* reveals that the majority of them are supporters or sympathizers of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). However, in spite of the diversity within the *ulama*, our findings show some consensus on four fundamental issues, around which they mobilized their followers toward the April 2007 elections. These issues are presented as follows:

### **Relationship between Islam and Democratic Politics**

According to Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil, one of the most influential Islamic scholars in Kano, “the *ulama* generally view Islam and politics as inseparable. Islam as a complete way of life is concerned with regulating all human activities, politics inclusive. Accordingly, since democratic politics is about leadership, elections and good governance, the majority of the *ulama* see the relationship between politics and Islam as inseparable and Islam and democracy as compatible” (Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil 2007). This opinion agrees with the findings of a larger study conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Democratic Research and Training (CDRT) of Bayero University, Kano, on the *Ulama* in Contemporary Northern States of Nigeria. The CDRT study, which interviewed over five thousand *ulama* across the nineteen Northern States of Nigeria, found out that the majority of the *ulama* interviewed believe that the practice of democracy is not un-Islamic and that democracy could be used to advance and defend the interests of Muslims in a secular state (CDRT Report, 2005: 104).

### **The Imperative of *Ulama's* Participation in Politics**

Most of the *ulama* strongly believed that since the religion of Islam and politics are inseparable, an Islamic scholar must, as a matter of religious duty, participate actively in the political sphere. Indeed, prior to the 2007 elections, many of the *ulama* who participated in politics publicly defended and campaigned for more active and positive involvement of Islamic scholars in politics and governance, believing that would greatly help towards sanitizing political conduct, influence policies and strengthen the *sharia* implementation. Malam Abdullahi Salihu Aikawa, leader of Kano-based radical Jama'atul Tajdid Islam (JTI), argued that “the constructive involvement of *ulama* in contemporary politics would demonstrate, in concrete terms, the doctrine of the inseparability of politics from religion in Islam” (2007). The advocacy for *ulama's* participation in politics and indeed the *ulama's* actual involvement in the democratic politics since 1999 signaled a major change of attitude. Previously, some Muslims argued that Islamic scholars and Muslims should reject active participation in politics, and if possible, overthrow the secular state on the grounds that the system is not simply un-Islamic but also anti-Islam. This view, which is increasingly a minority position, was recently re-echoed by Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, whose group has Shi'ite sympathies, during the birth day celebration of the Prophet Muhammad (*Maulud*) held in Kaduna on April 15, 2007, when in reference to the state of the nation, he remarked: “How can a Muslim be truly happy living in a state that has no respect for Islamic values? The way forward is for Muslims to unite to face our common challenge of living in a failed state that has been imposed on us” (Bilkisu 2007:21). El-Zakzaky's group has repeatedly argued that the solution to the crisis facing the Nigerian Muslim lies in the overthrow of the existing secular state and its replacement with an Islamic state.

### **Muslim Participation in the Electoral Process**

In their sermons, all the *ulama* appealed to the Muslim electorate (men and women) to participate fully in the electoral process, from voters' registration to the actual voting on April 14 and 21, 2007. They argued that it is a religious duty for every Muslim to ensure the election of good leaders and representatives for it is only through voting that Muslims would elect leaders to articulate and protect Muslims' interest. When closing his Ramadan *tafsir* (public commentary on the Qur'an) on October 19, 2006, Dr. Ahmad Gumi spoke at length on the 2007 elections, calling on Muslim voters to come out *en masse* and exercise their civic duty by voting for candidates of their choice. He urged "the Muslim voters to resist the use of money and intimidation during the elections," and to defend their votes against electoral malpractices. Dr Gumi promised that his organization, the Izala Movement, would be involved in election observation to prevent rigging and any electoral fraud during the April 2007 polls.

### **Voting for Credible Candidates**

Choice of credible, honest and God fearing candidates irrespective of their political party affiliation was emphasized over and over by all the *ulama* in their various sermons and pronouncements. Thus religious orientation of the candidates was deliberately down played at both the national and state levels, a position that could be explained at the national level by the fact that in the April 2007 presidential elections, all the three major political parties in the country—Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and Action Congress (AC)—fielded Northern Muslim candidates and Southern Christians running mates respectively. As Paden (2006) predicted, the politicians in all the political parties sought to cultivate and maintain cross regional alliances by down playing religious issues and symbols. Again, even in the *sharia* states, issues relating to Islam and religious symbols like the *sharia* itself were down played, perhaps because *sharia* implementation in many of the states was already a settled matter. Indeed, anyone who campaigned against the *sharia* in the states surely would not be voted for. Hence, the issue emphasized by the *ulama* during the electoral mobilization was the candidate's character and personality. This is consistent with the national trend in Nigerian politics of often focusing on candidates rather than issues or party. The *ulama* always advised voters to vote for *mutumin kirki* (good man) or *mai tsoron Allah* (God fearing) or *mai rikon amana* (trustworthy).. As Kirk Green (1973:7-8) emphasized, the concept of *mutumin kirki* in Muslim-Hausa society embodies a whole range of virtues such as *gaskiya* (trust), *riikon amana* (trustworthiness), integrity, generosity and patience, among others.

### **Other Issues Raised by the Ulama in Mobilizing Voters**

As mentioned earlier, the Nigerian *ulama* are not homogeneous in their religious and political views, and those participating in politics are divided along party lines. The political differences often come to the fore when they identify themselves with a particular candidate and overtly or covertly campaign for their chosen candidate, as illustrated in the political situation preceding the 2007 elections in Kano. The majority of the modern *ulama* and Muslim activists patronized by the Kano State Government since 2003 openly supported and campaigned for the re-election of Governor Ibrahim Shekarau in 2007 polls. As the April 2007 elections approached, various Islamic organizations held seminars, public lectures and symposia on leadership, good governance and elections. In addition, Imams used Friday sermons to mobilize their congregations for the elections and informed them of the need to re-elect Governor Shekarau because of his good personal character possessing all the virtues

of a *mutumin kirki* and excellent leadership of a just ruler. He was also scored very highly for his performance in *sharia* implementation, human development and welfare of workers, pensioners and the down trodden masses in the society. The pro-Shekarau *ulama* also campaigned extensively for Governor Shekarau in Kano State controlled media houses—Radio Kano, City Television and *Triumph Newspaper*.

However, two groups of *ulama* posed a strong opposition against the candidature of Governor Shekarau. The first group comprised the leadership of Qadiriyya led by Sheikh Karibulla Nasiru Kabara and Tijaniyya led by Khalifa Isyaka Rabi’u, both patronized by the former PDP Governor of Kano State, Rabi’u Musa Kwankwaso. When Governor Shekarau took power in 2003, the leadership of the two brotherhoods was excluded in running the affairs of the state, thereby pushing these influential Islamic scholars into the fold of the opposition PDP. Although moderate and cautious in expressing their opposition to Governor Shekarau, they openly interacted with the PDP stalwarts in the State.

The second group of the opposition in Kano was the radical wing of the Izala movement called Ta’awun Bain al-Du’at al-Salafiyyin<sup>3</sup> under the leadership of Sheikh Abba Adam Koki, the late Sheikh Jafar Mahmud Adam (the Chief Imam of Friday Mosque in Dorayi), and Sheikh Abubakar Rijiyar Lemo (the Chief Imam of Friday Mosque in Rijiyar Lemo). In their various sermons and lectures, Sheikh Abubakar Rijiyar Lemo and Malam Adam Koki openly attacked the personality of Governor Shekarau and his policies, criticizing his perceived use of Islam for political ends. In a series of Friday sermons recorded on audio cassettes and freely sold in Kano, Imam Abubakar accused Governor Shekarau of religious discrimination, citing the membership in the Governor’s Shura committee, whose fifty members were drawn from all the major religious sects and organizations in Kano, but in which the Izala group is grossly under-represented. Charging deceit in the *sharia* implementation in Kano, Imam Abubakar often called upon his audience not to re-elect Shekarau. Other members of the group such as the late Sheikh Jafar Mahmud Adam were more cautious in showing their political differences with Governor Shekarau, but his eloquent lectures left no doubt about his political message of utter dissatisfaction with the performance of Shekarau’s administration. Sheikh Jafar was shot and killed by unidentified gunmen as he led the dawn prayers on Friday April 13, 2007, just a day before the Governorship election. The previous day, he had given one of his most political lectures in his other Mosque at Gadon Kaya where he outlined the qualities Muslim voters should look for in any candidate aspiring to govern the Muslim community, either in a secular or Islamic state. Police investigations are yet to reveal the assailants.

### **The Views of the *Ulama* after the Elections**

It is now public knowledge both in Nigeria and abroad that what happened on April 14 and 21, 2007 were indeed the worst elections ever in the country’s history. The conduct of the elections was characterized by large scale rigging, result falsification, intimidation and violence across the country. Specifically, the monumental electoral fraud and malpractices carried out by the politicians, with active connivance of security agents and election officials manifested in numerous ways: late, inadequate or non-supply of election materials to opposition strongholds, delay in opening polling stations, stuffing of ballot boxes, under-age voting, lack of secrecy in voting, vote buying and inducement of voters with money and

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<sup>3</sup> This is a sunni movement in Kano whose anti-sufism ideology could be traced back to the doctrines of Salafiyyah and Wahhabiyyah movements founded by Ahmad Taqi al-Din I’ Abbas b. Shaykh Shihas al-Din Taymiyya and Muhammad b. Abd al- Wahhab.

other materials, and failure to comply with the provision of the constitution and electoral law. Thus, expectedly, the scale, magnitude and dimension of the electoral fraud witnessed during the elections attracted widespread criticisms from stakeholders nationally and internationally.

The *ulama* are one of such stakeholders who expressed their opinions on the elections. Like other stakeholders and commentators, some of them condemned the elections as a sham and its conduct as the worst in the country's recent history.<sup>4</sup> A group of *ulama* who monitored the elections in parts of Niger State rejected the announced results because they did not reflect the people's wish.<sup>5</sup> However, despite the many serious lapses witnessed, some leading *ulama*, like Dr. Ahmad Gumi<sup>6</sup> and Sheikh Safiyanu Abdullahi (2007) called on Nigerians to accept the results in good faith without any recourse to violence, and urged that the way forward was for all Nigerians to "pray for the newly elected leaders to be God-fearing in the discharge of their responsibilities" and strive hard to address the observed problems in the conduct of the elections. Specifically, Sheikh Abdullahi argued that "to find solution to the electoral fraud and political corruption being witnessed in the country we must confront the phenomenon of endemic corruption and indiscipline at every level of our society" (2007) The Kano *ulama* were silent on the outcome of the elections, perhaps because the result of the Governorship elections reflects their wishes and the wishes of the majority of the electorate in the State.

## Conclusion

This essay reviewed the increased political activism of the *ulama* in Nigerian politics since 1999, particularly in Kano State. It specifically underscored the role played by the *ulama* in the April 2007 elections, which revolved around mobilizing Muslim voters to participate in the electoral process to elect credible, honest and God-fearing people into elective positions. The *ulama* also forcefully defended their increasing involvement in politics and governance, arguing that it is only through their active participation in the political sphere that they would be able to articulate and protect the concerns of Muslims, as well as actualize the hopes and aspirations of the Muslim Community. Thus, the essay draws attention to the fact that in some Muslim dominated states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the *ulama* are indeed becoming important players in Nigeria's contemporary political arena. The essay demonstrates that the struggle to get *sharia* implemented was largely responsible for the *ulama's* active involvement in the current democratic politics. With the *sharia* implemented in the twelve northern states under the current democratic governance, we are witnessing an interesting dialogue in Nigeria's public sphere between Islam and democracy. In this regard, Nigerians must face the challenge of determining how to accommodate religion and religious actors in the country's democratic space. It appears that both the Muslim and Christian Nigerians have settled the argument of Nigeria's secularity by the emergent national consensus that Nigeria is not secular but a multi religious country. Although this essay has focused on the practical consequences of this consensus as seen in the active participation of *ulama* in electoral politics, parallel developments are also discernible among Nigerian Christians. Churches and affiliated organizations, as well as clergy and laity are also actively engaged in Nigerian politics by campaigning and getting elected, as evidenced, for example, in the elections of Rev. Wilberforce Juta in 1993 and Rev. Jolly Nyame in 1999 and 2003 as

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<sup>4</sup> See Press Release of the Conference of Islamic Scholars, *Daily Trust*, Monday May 7, 2007: 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Trust* Friday, April 27, 2007: 48.

<sup>6</sup> *New Nigerian*, Friday April 27, 2007: 1-2.

state governors. The Churches are also openly involved in articulating their understanding of qualities of good leaders, disagreeing with government policies, monitoring elections, and endorsing new governments.

The April 2007 elections have come and gone, and except for the large voter turnout, which could be regarded as a major gain for democracy, all other aspects of the elections were flawed. The organization of the election was poor and the conduct was characterized by unprecedented fraud and widespread rigging, making the elections and outcomes neither free, fair, nor credible. Indeed what Nigerians saw on April 14 and 21, 2007 were not elections, but violent selection and imposition of unpopular candidates against the popular will of the electorate. The ruling PDP, the so-called Independent Electoral Commission, the security agents and party thugs were responsible for the misconduct that beset the entire process. Local, national and international observers are all agreed that elections did not meet the minimum standards required for democratic credibility (Kawu 2007). However, despite everything that happened, Nigerians are full of hopes for democracy, especially in light of the election petition tribunals nullifying elections compromised by the more egregious violations. Several individuals and organizations have already started providing options on the way forward for Nigeria's democratic development.

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