

ISLAM, WOMEN AND POLITICS IN NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Some feminists criticise Islam because of its alleged teachings on women, most especially in the sphere of politics. Muslims, in reaction to this, have been polarized into three schools. A school stands to maintain the seclusive attitude towards women; another school subscribe to the feminist propaganda while other seeks to maintain a balanced position that respects Islamic long tradition and culture and does not ignore contemporary realities and challenges. Against this background, this research is an attempt to examine the true position of Islam towards participation of women in political activities using Nigeria as a case study. The paper involves both field and library researches relying on the primary and secondary sources for collecting information. It submits that it is not against clear Islamic injunctions that women can participate in some identified political processes after fulfilling selected conditions which seem to be imaginary in contemporary time. It also concludes that the success of the advocacy for increasing upsurge of women contesting for political positions will be socially and economically detrimental to the interest of Nigerian society.

Keywords: Women, politicking, Islam and Nigeria

Introduction

The intellectual deliberations on study of women affairs are one of the most appealing subjects in recent time. This is not unconnected to the peculiar and unique natural dispositions of this sex. Women are said to form the larger percentage of people in most societies.¹ It is noticed that Islam is a major and a popular victim of the condemnation and reprimand of feminists over men's attitudes to women. Some of the accusations directed to Islam include but not limited to creating segregation between male and female, confining women to their marital homes and restricting their social and political activities. Muslims, in reaction to this, have been polarized into three groups. A group favours the attitude of secluding women; another group subscribes to the feminist propaganda while another seeks to maintain intermediate position that respects Islamic long

tradition and culture which does not ignore contemporary realities and challenges.

Viewed towards this direction, this paper aims at presenting the true and pristine position of Islam on participation of women in political activities, using Nigeria politics as a case study. This study is very apposite at a time when Nigeria is witnessing an unprecedented upsurge of women in political advocacy. The secularization policy of government which aims at de-emphasizing religion and excising it from political spectrum takes prominence among the factors responsible for the promotion of this manifestation.² Hence, this paper ventures into the immediate implication of this clamour on the wellbeing of family, social and economic structure of Nigeria.

Politics: An Islamic Perspective

The Arabic terminology for politics is “*As-Siyāsah*”. It literally means an act of taking control over something.³ Technically, according to Qaradawi, the ancient scholars of Islam used the word ‘*Siyāsah*’ to mean either of the following two connotations: to take control over human affairs by implementing the Islamic law as code of conduct and it also means a policy formulated by the Imam i.e. president or head of a nation.⁴

However, the first connotation is the general intention of scholars when *Siyāsah* is mentioned. Thus, it corresponds to the English word, politics, which means science or art of government or the science dealing with the form, organization and administration of state.⁵ It can be deduced from the foregoing that the only distinction between Islamic politics and other systems is that in the former, every process, activity and procedure through which the state is governed are subjected to the values of Islamic principles. Though, according to *Al-Jawhari*, it is a blunder to attribute Islamic mode of government to any of the existing various systems of government currently in operation, yet Islam is not opposed to some good features in the Western systems.⁶

The orbit around which ‘*Siyāsah*’ revolves in Islam is that it should not go contrary to Islamic values and should be in the best interest of the electorate.⁷ Islam conceives politics as both spiritual and natural disposition of man. This assertion accounts for why politics is regarded as an integral part of Islam *abi-initio*.⁸ The concept of “*Khilāfah*” which connotes divine instruction for man to properly undertake the affairs of the earth, further stresses the importance of that politics in Islam. The history of Prophet Muhammad and his successors (*Khulafāu*) also displayed such emphasis politics attracts in Islam. Thus, owing to the aforementioned,

early Muslim scholars have advanced politics to a learned discipline by their various write-ups: *Al-Ahkâmus-Sultâniyyah* by Al-Mawardi (d.450 AH), Abu Ya'la Al-Farrâu (d.458AH) also titled his work with same; "*Ghiyâthul-Umam*" by Imâmul-Haramayn (d.476 A.H), *As-Siyâsatul-Shar'iyyah* by ibn Taimiyah (d.728 A.H) and "*At-Turqul-Hikmiyyah* by Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (d.751 A.H) and many contemporary works by current scholars also followed suit.

It is noteworthy that Muslims were traumatized for the first time by a view alienating Islam totally from politics and governance in 1925 by an Egyptian scholar known as Ali Abdur-Razziq in his work titled: "*Al-Islam wa Usul ul-Hikam*".⁹ This controversial work caused commotion in the Muslim world. Many scholars reacted to this strange view by intellectual publications. The most famous rejoinders are the works of the then Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad Bakhit Al-Mutihiyy titled: "*Aqiqatul-islamwa Usul ul-Hikam*", and the work of later Shaykh Al-Azhar, Muhammad Al-Khidr Husayni titled: "*Naqdh Kitâbil-Islâm wa Usulil-Hikam*".

The work of *Abdur-Razik* attracted Western sponsorship and publication because it contains sacrilege against the teachings of Islam. Meanwhile, with casual perusal of the major works on Islamic politics, it is crystal clear that politics is aimed at maintaining the nation properly; enjoining good and forbidding evil, so that the earth will be a conducive place for dedicated worship to the Almighty Allah. Q9:71 and Q22:41 attest to this. Based on this, according to Islamic perception, politics that is based on the aforementioned principles, is a responsibility of every individual in a Muslim society. Each individual on his own capacity strives to contribute positively towards the development of the society. In a Muslim oriented community, both the leaders and followers, in other expressions, both the elected and electorate are politicians. Politics is not business of few members of the society. The society begins from family level before it metamorphosed into a big society. Hence, Muslims are politically prepared right from family level. The Prophet, thus, said: "All of you (Muslims) are shepherds and all of you would be responsible for his/her subject".¹⁰

This prophetic proclamation has tasked every reasonable individual with one or two responsibilities. It is regarded as preparation of every individual for larger responsibilities. Although, the peak of every political struggle is to take over control and administration of a state, but Islamic system takes exception by laying emphasis to ability of discharging cumbersome responsibilities thereof. While in other systems

of political arrangements, every individual wants to display political right via ambitions for leadership position, other fertile areas of political responsibility in an Islamic arrangement are urging the leaders to perform well; collaborating with government in tangible projects and condemning bad policies of the government. By performing the aforementioned, one is acknowledged as a politician. Thus, politics in Islamic conception is wide, comprehensive and inclusive manifestation of every society.

Women and Politics in Islam

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that politics is not only a natural manifestation, but also a spiritual instruction. As far as Islam is concerned, there is no distinction between religious and secular duties, whether the latter concerns political, economic or social well-being. All in the view of Islam are regarded as religious duties.¹¹ Thus, according to Doi, women have a say in deciding the affairs of the state where they live. The lawful affairs of this world in this case are also to be treated as affairs of religion.¹² Accordingly, the early Muslim women participated in the politics of their time. Evidence abounds in the Qur'an and Islamic history of the participation of women in serious discussions and arguments even with the Prophet himself.¹³ For instance, the Qur'an records the case of an aggrieved woman who lodged complaints with the Prophet over her serious objection against maltreatment by her husband. Allah upheld her complaint and therefore gave an injunction which affected a change of the deep-rooted anti-social Arab custom of abandoning a wife for no just cause.¹⁴ It is also on record that during the caliphate of Umar, a woman engaged him in serious argument in the mosque in the presence of a large congregation of worshippers. She proved her point and caused the *Khalifa* to declare in the presence of the people that he was wrong and the woman was right.¹⁵ At the time of the Prophet, women joined their male counterparts in the defense of Muslim community by partaking in battles. Also, Umar appointed *As-Shifa* (woman) to look over market affairs in his regime.¹⁶

It is noteworthy that political atmosphere during the time of the Prophet was quite different from what is currently known as political activities. For instance, casting vote, campaign, political rally, occupying of political offices and all of such electoral processes are absent in the political record of the Prophet and his successors'- era. Hence, women's participation in these activities is a subject of heated argument and scholarship among contemporary Muslim scholars. Traditional scholars are of the view that women should be prevented from this type of political

activities.¹⁷ Their opinion is premised on the assertion that participation of women in the aforementioned will certainly lead to *Fitnah* (public nuisance). Furthermore, the aforementioned activities require trooping out of women without limitation and restriction. Q33:33 instruct women to stay in their home. In addition to this, such participation often collides with the main and obligatory responsibility of women, which is maintaining their marital home and good nurturing of children.

Contrary to the orthodox view, some modern scholars maintain that there is no religious barrier for the participation of women in these activities. Qaradawi,¹⁸ Badawi,¹⁹ and Turabi²⁰ champion the vanguard of this school of thought. Their argument is based on the fact that women are entitled to decide who govern them as their men counterpart. Though in the early stage of Islamic history, leaders used to emerge via mutual consultation (*Shura*) of great Muslim personalities, subject to approval of major citizens in the state, which include women, the change in the system through which leader emerges does not justify depriving women of this right. However, it should be noted that the conditions attached to the permissibility of this act in respect of women are very imaginary and unrealistic when the current political atmosphere is put into consideration.

According to *Qaradawi*, women are under certain conditions to be fulfilled before they can be allowed to partake in such activities. The consent of husband should be solicited, in other instance, the approval of guardian; the dress code of Islamic culture should be adopted, and that should not jeopardize the principal responsibility of taking care of home.²¹ The foregoing conditions indicate that women are restricted to some extent in professing such political rights. Thus, it is obvious that some writers, such as Abdul-Raheem, misrepresent Islam when they strongly advocate for women participation in current political activities without any restriction.²² One would think that the major reason for this misrepresentation is owing to the feminist indoctrination and brainwashing to which many current academicians have fallen prey.

It is indisputable that many political offices require stressful management that may not conform to the natural peculiarity of women. Jimoh enumerates some hurdles and limitations of women vis-a-vis holding of political positions. Menstruation period which often constitutes a tough moment for women; breast-feeding, requirement of *Mahram* (male relative) for traveling; consent of the husband in all doings; forbidding being in a sanctum with opposite sex, have been identified as hurdles against some of their political rights.²³ Hence, it is safe to conclude this matter by holding that though women are entitled to the current

political rights and activities in restricted and required conditions that should be fulfilled as earlier enumerated. It is fallacious to deem that they share these rights on equally with their male folks. Q4:32 provision is very relevant for this assertion:

And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. For man is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned. And ask Allah of His bounty. Indeed, Allah is ever, of all things, knowing.

This verse alludes to the fact that each male and female has been divinely allotted his/ her responsibility and duty.

Women in Politics: The Nigerian Experience

The past two decades (1999- 2019) are said to have witnessed an impressive rise in women's political representation around the world, with the global average in the share of women in national parliaments doubling during that time, and all regions making substantial progress towards the goal of 30 percent women's representation in decision making.²⁴ Since 2003, Rwanda has maintained the record as the country with the highest female legislative representation in the world, surpassing the Nordic countries. Four of the world's top 10 countries, in terms of women's share of single or lower house of parliament, are in Sub-Saharan Africa: Rwanda, Seychelles, Senegal, and South Africa.²⁵ While some African countries are making giant strides in women's political representation, others like Nigeria have achieved very little progress. Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule, the country has conducted six national general elections (in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019), of which the record of women's political representation has been somewhat mixed.

Nigeria achieved the highest percentage (7.0 percent) of women's representation in the lower parliament (the House of Representatives) in 2007 after the dismal record of 3.4 percent and 4.9 percent in 1999 and 2003, respectively. However, the figures declined to 6.8 percent and 5.6 percent in 2011 and 2015.²⁶ It should be noted however that, following the conclusion of a number of election petition cases by 2017, the figure went up to 6% (22 in the House of Representatives and 7 in the Senate). In April 2007, there were a total of 1,200 women aspirants to 1,532 offices, with 660 of them winning their primaries. 93 finally emerged as winners: Six deputy governors, nine senators, 27 national representatives and 52 in various State Houses of Assembly.²⁷ There were also notable increases in the number of women holding cabinet and ministerial positions. Although,

it failed to fulfil its promise of 30% of cabinet positions for women, the Yar'Adua government (2007-2010) did place seven women on these high offices. The April 2007 election also saw Nigeria record its first female speaker of the House, the Honourable Patricia Olubunmi Etteh. Despite all these, Nigerian women have lagged behind in political power and decision making which is one of the key areas identified during the 1995 Beijing Conference.²⁸

Nigerian women continue to condemn their continued marginalization in the political sphere. Rabi Musa, coordinator of the Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), told IPS news Agency that: "Although it has been a decade of uninterrupted civilian rule, Nigerian women are still battling political marginalization where they are not given the chance to hold political office".²⁹ In the same vein, female politician, Maryam Jari told IPS that while "women constitute the majority of voters during elections; they are hardly given a level playing ground to actualize their dreams of active involvement in the politics of the country through elective offices".³⁰ In a bid to implement the 35% affirmative action provided for in Nigeria's Gender Policy, gender activist and civil society organization such as the National Coalition on Affirmative Action have organized programs of advocacy, training and research on affirmative to encourage female political participation.

Shortly after Dr Goodluck Jonathan became president in May 2011, the first lady Dame Patience Jonathan launched the Women for Change Initiative, aimed at promoting women's participation in the political sphere, amongst other things, emphasize its need to mainstream Nigeria's political sphere. President Goodluck Jonathan promised women a 35 percent slot in his cabinet and he fulfilled his vow because it is his desire to ensure a level playing field in Nigeria by heading an administration where ethnicity, gender and religion do not hinder qualified persons from fulfilling their potential.³¹ It is also the reason he ordered the admission of women to the Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA) for the first time in Nigeria history. In his "Women should brace up to be all they want to be in life as this administration will be an enabler of their progress", Goodluck Jonathan is the first president in Nigerian history to appoint women out of 41 ministers as member of his cabinet.

Women who have set precedence in leadership positions are Obiageli Ezekwesili, late Dora Akunyili, former Director General of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and control (NAFDAC) of Nigeria and former Nigerian minister of Information and

Communication and Patricia Olubunmi Etteh the first female speaker of the House of Representatives. Despite these improvements, women are still under-represented in most levels of government and have little progress in attaining position at the decision-making levels.

Generally, Nigeria has a policy environment that would appear to support gender equity. Firstly, the country is a signatory to most of the international conventions on gender equality and women empowerment. Secondly, successive governments in the country have established a vibrant institutional structure for the development and implementation of gender policies, coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs with desk officers for each sector, and corresponding Women Affairs Officers in each government ministry. Thirdly, there seems to be a widespread appreciation of gender issues as both government and non-governmental organizations emphasize gender mainstreaming in their activities.³² Despite the above opportunities, feminists are disappointed with the slowing growth of women's influence in the political terrains in Nigeria. Many factors have been identified as obstacles.

Nigerian politics is capital intensive as it requires spending large amount of money to organize and mobilize support to win an election. In Nigeria, female candidates rarely receive sponsorship from donors. Women in Nigeria are not as economically empowered as men. In most communities, women are economically dependent on their husbands who control family income, even where women are allowed to engage in money making venture, their husbands control the purse. Due to the various types of culture and beliefs of different people in different parts of the country, most Nigerians believe that women are meant to be in the lower-class, while men should be in the upper-class which is a very wrong way of reasoning or belief to have about women generally. In some other countries such as Rwanda, women are given the opportunity to participate in politics and contest with men for various political posts.

In Nigeria, women are always seen or viewed in the aspect of being restricted to domestic affairs like taking care of the home, taking care of their husbands and kids. Some people believe that women are not supposed to be involved in politics because of the hard or difficult challenges they feel they will face during the contest, such as organizing political parties' campaign programs, conference and meetings. Yet some women are determined to participate in politics. This is because they believe they can do better than the men. They believe they can also face the challenges and come out with better results. Social, economic, cultural and religious factors are largely responsible for women's marginalization

in politics, particularly in the Muslim dominated part of the society, where politics is seen as men's exclusive preserve. Women are mostly seen as minority in a male- dominated sphere. However, compared to the past, Nigeria is currently experiencing an unprecedented upsurge in the women's participation and agitation for political opportunities.

Many factors account for this recent manifestation. The feminist movement which is aimed at liberating women folk from traditional oppression and discriminative treatment plays a major role in this manifestation. Feminism, in recent time, attracts much sympathy from even the male folk, and paradoxically, from some Muslim scholars who tend to present Islam to the West in a guise that will attract Western pleasure. This movement which started from European countries penetrated the Muslim world in the beginning of twentieth century.³³ Egypt was a stronghold for this movement. Some Muslim women at the outset of twentieth century protested against the dominating seclusive attitude of Muslims towards women in the then Egypt. The place where this historic protest took place was later named after "Tahreer Square".³⁴ Casual observation shows that the clamour of feminists have reached long distance that the popular adage: "*What a man can do, a woman can do better*" has been strongly inculcated in the thoughts of every mortal of twenty first century. The effect of this clamour translates to competitive participation of women in politics of Nigeria.

The influence of Western world on the contemporary women emancipation project is not far-fetched in this subject. Pioneering work for the change in the status of women started in Britain in the field of education and continued progressively until it covered many other functional aspects of life. Many international bodies like UNESCO have embarked on massive sponsor and promotion of gender equalization. Hence, the support received from foreign countries has in a great measure triggered the upsurge of Nigeria women in political business.

The conventional mind-set of Nigerians is that appointment into political position is an opportunity for amassing one's share in the so called "national cake". This mentality does not exclude the women folk, hence, the insatiable passion for political appointments. Materialism is a major factor in the women drive for politics in Nigeria. Women are not exempted from running after worldly ornamentations.

Implication of Nigerian Women's Participation in Politics

The participation of women in the political activities has dual implications in all ramifications of a given country. Though this

manifestation has its positive sides, the negative effects outweigh the positive implications. Women are best suitable for some certain offices. Hence, by occupying such offices, women are contributing their own quota to the development of society. A good antecedent for this is when *Umar* appointed *As-Shifau* to undertake the affairs of market.³⁵ No sex can better handle such task than a woman. Many aspects abound today where women perform better than male-folks. Parastatals that take care of women affairs, empowerment of widows and corresponding areas are all considered mainly reserved positions for women elite. Another area where women participation in politics is a plus to the development of a society is when they are given the right to cast vote in the electoral process. Their votes which translate to a voice in support or otherwise of a candidate are crucial to the emergence of popular candidate. This writer is of the opinion that preventing women from exercising this right has no basis in Islamic culture, rather it is a view premised on the long-day seclusive attitude towards women. Provided women maintain ethics of Islamic make-up for women, there is no basis, according to Qaradawi for preventing them from this exercise.³⁶ Taking Muslim women as a case study, depriving them right of casting vote may be catalyst for the emergence of a non-Muslim candidate.

The negative implications of women partaking in politics are manifest in family, social and economic wellbeing of every nation. Yusuf is of the view that children, in a society where women prefer politics to nurturing kids, are open to societal viruses and are culpable to vices.³⁷ Beside this, competitive engagement of women in politics at the expense of their main responsibility at home has been regarded by some observers as interference with the plan of God. Donoran, a biblical scholar's wording, is apposite:

Although men and women are equally important and precious to God, He did not make them exactly alike. God clearly made man and woman for different functions and different purposes in life. If we try to change or distort these roles, we interfere with the plan of God.³⁸

Thus, abandonment of noble role in the family is the price which a society pays in this type of manifestation. Women's participation in politics also records bad implications on the society. Anecdotal experience has shown that most women sacrifice their dignity for political appointment. Gbenda enumerates some societal vices caused by this phenomenon. According to him, women's struggles for equality in all ramifications of life has bred

indecent dressing, an alarming rate of women's involvement in crime; also, it bred the concept of "single woman" who does not want herself subjected to man's rule.³⁹

Economically, this phenomenon has tampered with the economic wellbeing of every society. Economics has to do with appropriately utilizing the endowed resources, so that limited resources will suffice the unlimited demanders.⁴⁰ Going by this notion, every citizen has a role to play in promoting the economic status of the state. Each gender is peculiar with some aspects of productivity that other gender is not able to produce. Hence, if one gender is preoccupied by natural endowment of another, this will translate to dormant and unproductive economy. According to Yusuf, the current influx of women into political battle, if diverted to other areas, would have boosted our economy. There abound several aspects which women can actively contribute to the economic development of our state, such services include: nursing, medicine, teaching and breastfeeding. It is surprising that in all that aforementioned, we have little to show for them.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that women have some political rights accorded to them by the *Shari'ah*. They are not discriminated in some of these rights from men, though because of natural peculiarity they are, to some extent, restricted in some other political activities. It is a great misrepresentation of Islam to deem that Islam gives women the same right as their men counterparts in all ramifications of life. Thus, women should exercise their political rights within the ambit of Islamic culture and identity. This paper strongly contends that women should be motivated to channel their abilities toward proper management of their homes; rather than drawing them into the mud of politics that may injure the healthy status of their marital homes.

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