

Islamic Scholarly Leadership and Political Governance: A Study of the Role of *Ulama* in Decision- making in Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between religious leaders and political governance by exploring the roles of the *ulama* (Islamic Scholars) in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. *Ulama* refers to Islamic Scholars and those trained in Islamic science, Prophetic traditions, Jurisprudence, and theology. They are traditionally seen in Islamic intellectual history not just as educators but as custodians of religious knowledge who guide communities in both spiritual and moral matter. The objective of this paper is to examine how Islamic scholarly leadership (*Ulama*) influences political governance and decision-making processes in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, and to assess their roles to ethical leadership, social stability, and public policy. The research adopts a descriptive method, findings reveal that *Ulama* played roles in political governance of Nasarawa state. Especially during election period, many respondents reported that Friday sermons, Islamic lectures, and informal advice from *Ulama* strongly impacted how voted. The paper concludes by investigating the roles of *Ulama* (Islamic scholars) in Nasarawa State politics. The study recommends the state should organize workshop for *Ulama* and other religious leaders to increase their understanding of democratic governance.

Keywords: Islamic Scholarly, Leadership, Political Governance, roles of *ulama* in decision making,

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ulama (Islamic scholars) have played a vital role in shaping political behavior in Muslim societies by providing religious legitimacy, interpreting Islamic law, and influencing public opinion. Their authority often driven from their deep understanding of the Qur'an, Hadith, and *Shariah* (Islamic law), which enables them to guide both the rulers and the ruled. Also, the *ulama* (Islamic Scholars) shape political behavior is by legitimizing or opposing political authority. For instance, in many Islamic environments, leaders have sought the endorsement of *ulama* to strengthen their claims to power. Muslim politicians depended on the *ulama* to legitimate their rule by declaring it Islamic and to secure popular support” (Esposito 58). Moreover, *ulama* (Islamic Scholars) mobilized political involvement through their *Khutba* (sermons), fatwas (legal opinions), and public teachings. Islamic scholars in Nasarawa State used their religious authority to challenge the government. (Roy 92). Normally, *Ulama* influence political behavior by framing political issues in religious terms, which can gather public support. They act as intermediaries between state and

society, often controlling educational institutions and mosques where political dialogue can be shaped. (Feldman 110).

Nasarawa State is a place with various communities which comprises two major religion, Islam, and Christianity. Religious authorities' particularly *ulama* (Islamic Scholars) often use influence over elections, governance, and conflict prevention. The role of *ulama* (Islamic Scholars) in local peace building is well documented, for instance through interfaith workshop with imams and other religious leaders against religious politics. (Yusuf 6). **In Nasarawa State**, Political elites have been criticized for favoring their ethnic or religious groups in appointments, resource distribution, and policy decisions, and so on. **And also**, Votes are often cast based on community affiliations rather than policy positions. Politicians have employed strategies such as labeling candidates as "non-indigenous" to undermine them, particularly ahead of elections. **However**, studies indicates that religious bias in Nasarawa State exist between Muslim and Christian groups, but they hardly result in exposed religious conflict. (Siddiqui 10). In Nasarawa State, *ulama* and tends to mobilize people to vote for particular candidates, during campaign and inter religious conflict, *ulama* preach for their followers to avoid eth-no religious politics ahead of elections. *Ulama* are frequently invited by government to calm tension, prior to election. *Ulama* in the state, foster religious tolerance during period of election to avoid violence and political thuggery (Mamman, 20). In contemporary democratic governance, effective decision-making processes are expected to be inclusive, participatory, and reflective of the values and aspirations of the people. In Nasarawa State, Nigeria, religion plays a significant role in shaping social norms, political attitudes, and public behavior, with the Ulama (Islamic scholars) occupying a respected position as moral guides and opinion leaders within Muslim communities. Traditionally, the Ulama have influenced governance through advisory roles, mediation, and moral instruction, particularly on issues affecting justice, social harmony, and public welfare.

Furthermore, Nasarawa State is religiously diverse, and political decisions often require balancing competing interests to maintain peace and inclusive. The perceived influence of the Ulama on political leaders, public policy, and electoral processes may generate differing opinions among stakeholders, including politicians, civil society actors, and adherents of other faiths. However, scholarly investigations addressing these dynamics within the current political dispensation are scarce. This study therefore seeks to investigate the role of the Ulama in decision-making in the present political dispensation of Nasarawa State, with a view to examining the nature, scope, and implications of their involvement in governance and policy processes. The study aims to contribute to existing literature by providing empirical insights that can inform policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars on promoting inclusive and ethical governance in the state.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the role of the *ulama* in decision-making in the present political dispensation of Nasarawa State. Specifically, the study seeks to: Examine the nature and extent of the involvement of the *ulama* in political decision-making processes in Nasarawa State. To identify the channels through which the *ulama* influence political leaders and government policies in the state. To assess the impact of the *ulama's* participation on governance, policy formulation, and implementation in the present political dispensation. This study focuses on examining the role of *Ulama* (Islamic scholars) in decision-making processes within the contemporary political dispensation of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The scope is limited to the period of the current democratic governance, with particular emphasis on how *Ulama* influence political decisions, public policy formulation, conflict resolution, governance ethics, and community mobilization.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Concept of *Ulama* in Islamic perspective

Ulama, in Islamic perspective, refer to the scholars or experts in the religious knowledge. The term is derived from the Arabic word ‘*‘Alim*’ which means to know or to be learned. The *Ulama* are considered to be the heirs of the Prophets (*AlaihimSalam*) and are tasked to guiding the Muslim community through the application of Islamic law (*Shariah*) and interpreting the Qur’an and Sunnah (the practice and sayings of the Prophet (*SallallaHu Alaihim Wasalam*)). The Muslim community holds the scholars with significance in authority and respect due to their extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (*Figh*), theology (*Kalam*) and other related disciplines. The role of *Ulama* is not limited to more intellectual pursuits both also encompass moral and ethical responsibility to serve as a beacon of guidance for the community. The *Ulama* are expected to symbolize the highest moral and ethical standard and their actions and pronouncement are often seen as a reflection of the true teachings of Islam. They are also responsible of transmitting Islamic knowledge from one generation to another. (Rahman 54)

The concept of *Ulama* is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition and is mentioned in several verses of the Glorious *Quran* Allah Says;

Are those who know equal to those who do not know ? Q39: 9)

2.2 The Concept of Religious Leaders in Islamic Perspective

In Islamic thought, sovereignty belong to Allah. Leaders are seen as His representative on earth, tasked with implementing His laws and ensuring justice. This concept emphasizes that laws and policies should align with Islamic teachings. Religious leaders are accountable for their decision and actions, and they must act with integrity, fairness, and responsibility. This accountability extends to both worldly governance and the hereafter. The principle of *Shurah* is emphasizes in Islamic governance. Religious leaders are encourage to consult with their communities, particularly when making decision or policies. Religious leaders are responsible for promoting the welfare and best interest of the community. Policies and decisions should aim for the overall good of society, considering both moral and social implication. Islamic governance underscores the importance of the rule of law, where leaders themselves are subject to the law of Islam. This principle ensure that no one is above the law, promoting accountability and limiting arbitrary power. (Abdullah 5)

In Islam, religious leadership is primarily based on knowledge (*Ilm*) piety (*Taqwa*) and the responsibility to guide the community in spiritual and legal matter. Unlike some other religious, Islam does not have the formal priesthood, however some of the religious leaders such as Imam, Sheikh and mufti fulfill essential roles in interpreting Islamic teaching and guiding the believers. The Prophet (*SallallaHu Alaihi Wasallam*) regarded as the final messenger and the ultimate model for religious matters accepted to qualified religious who drive ruling from the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet (*SallallaHu Alaihi Wasallam*)). According to Kamali, religious leaders are those who combined legal reasoning (*Ijtihad*), deep knowledge of the scriptures, and moral integrity (Kamali, 223)

Islamic leadership is a trust and not a means for political or financial benefit. Al- Ghazali emphasized that religious leaders must fear Allah (*SubhanaHu Wata’ala*) and serve the public sincerely, warning against the corruption of scholars chase worldly power (Al-Ghazali 65). Therefore, in Islamic perspective, religious leaders are servant of the community, entrusted with the preservation of knowledge and ethical guidance.

2.3 The concept of politics in Islamic perspective

The word politics in Arabic is referring to *As-Siyasah*. The word attracts different interpretations. The word *as-Siyasah* is derived from the Arabic word ‘*Sasa*’ *yasusu*’ *Siyasatan*’ ‘to take care. If the word is used for human affairs, it means to administer the affairs’ (kachkar, 4). The word ‘*Siyasah*’ which means ‘the art of government. The word politics (*As-Siyasah*) simply means activities of the people that bring them closer to what is beneficial and keeping distance from evils. Similarly a contemporary scholar in the field of jurisprudence Shakir, viewed politics as composition of Islamic laws, from either revealed message or through analogy (*ijtihad*) which guide to what is beneficial and goodness to the entire Muslims as well as preventing them from evils.(6)

Ibn Taimiyyah also, viewed politics as comprising all the laws that are related to protecting trust of the state and its treasury, establishing justice and abiding the rule and regulation of Allah (*SubhanaHu Wata’ala*) on the right of human beings. (Taimiyyah 244). He further said whoever deviates from the Books (Qur’an and Sunnah) shall be corrected by Iron. Leaders according Islamic political system are the successors of the Prophet (*SallallaHu Alaihi Wasallam*) and should therefore, put all their efforts in ensuring justice prevail in their communities, and should try to stop and prevent all forms of oppression within and outside the leadership. Therefore, security of life and properties of citizens becomes paramount in an ideal leadership style. (Ahmad 108). In Islam, politics involves consultation among leaders and followers. Islamic politics prioritizes justice and fairness, ensuring that all individual are treated equally without bias. And also, Islamic politics emphasizes accountability, where leaders are responsible for their actions and decision before Allah (SWT) and their followers. Islamic governance involves consultation and participation of followers in decision making process, promoting collective responsibility and accountability. However, the aims of Islamic politics is to promote the objectives of *shariah*, including the preservation of life, faith, intellect, lineage and wealth. Thus, Islamic politics is guided by the *shariah* law, which involves a frame work of governance, justice, and morality. Islamic politics involves promoting good and preventing evil, encouraging followers to do good and discouraging them from doing evil.(Almawardi 30)

3.0 Methodology

A descriptive research method was adopted, this method provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic in Islamic perspectives. Both primary and secondary sources were used which includes Qur’an, Hadith and oral interview.

4.0 Result and Findings

4.1 Brief overview on Politics in Nasarawa State

Nasarawa State is located in North Central Nigeria and has a political land space shaped by ethical diversity, economic interest and historical events. The State was created in 1996 from plateau State. Nasarawa State is home to wide range ethnic groups, including Eggon, Alago, Hausa, Fulani, and many others. These ethnic groups have significance representation in the state politics, and political candidates often seek to balance interest across various ethnic constituencies to maintain political power. (Ogunyemi, 120). The state is governed by an elected Governor, and its legislature is a unicameral body known as Nasarawa State house of assembly. The Governor is both the executive head of state and a critical actor in shaping policy, including infrastructure, education, and health (Ibrahim & Danladi, 87)

Nasarawa State has experienced a fluctuating political government marked by both democratic and military rule. In recent years the state political atmosphere has been defined by strong competition between the all progressive congress (APC) and People Democratic Party (PDP). (Nguroje,75).

Political leadership in Nasarawa State has been concerned with solving issues of infrastructure, rural development, and security, Governor Abdullahi Alhaji Sule who took office in 2019, concentrated on fostering welfare of the masses and improving security, most especially in the rural area where banditry and communal conflicts have been prevalent (Adamu & Bala, 102). Nasarawa State has been affected by conflicts particularly the herdsmen and the farmers. These conflicts often change by ethnic differences and economic competitions, have influenced political alliances and governance strategies. Leaders, in Nasarawa state have to balance the interest of difference communities, including addressing the demand of ethnic groups and migrant communities involved in agriculture and livestock (Yusuf, 133)

4.2 Roles of *Ulama* and Religious Leaders in decision making in Nasarawa State Politics

In Nasarawa State, *Ulama* and religious leaders have played a significant roles in shaping the political state of affairs. The roles manifested through direct political engagements, and social mobilization. Nasarawa State, is mix of both Muslims and Christians communities, religious leaders frequently play a vital role in navigating interfaith relations and shaping the socio-political discourse. Below are some of the roles of *Ulama* and religious leaders in Nasarawa State politics.

(1) **Religious leaders as Political Mobilizers:** Religious leaders, particularly the *Ulama* are often seen as influential figures who can mobilize large number of people. In Nasarawa State, *Ulama* use their platform in Mosques and other religious gathering to influence public opinion on political matters. They endorse candidates, urge their followers to vote for particular candidates. For instance, during elections Islamic leaders often give sermon that emphasizes the religious duty to vote and support the right candidates. (Adamu & Bala, 110)

(2) **Religious leaders promote moral and ethical conduct:** *Ulama* in Nasarawa State, moral and ethical conduct, most a time advised politicians on how to align their action with Islamic values. They play an advisory role, particularly in matters related to governance, policy making, and distribution of resources. These religious leaders frequently hold the power to influence the political direction by issuing fatwa (Islamic legal opinions) that can either endorse or disapprove the action of political figures. Their participation extends to advisory on issues such as the prohibition of corruptions, fair in the distribution of public resources, and the implementation of Islamic value in public policy (Akinlolu, 69)

(3) **The role of religious leaders in conflicts resolution:** Nasarawa State has experienced ethnic and religious conflicts, particularly between the herdsmen and the farmers, and between the ethnic groups. In this situation religious leaders, particularly the *Ulama* (Islamic Scholars), play vital role in reconciling conflict and providing solutions grounded in Islamic teachings. Moreover, in 2019 religious leaders from both Muslims and Christians communities in Nasarawa State, came together to promote interfaith dialogue intended to reduce violence. Their intervention is highly influential because they are seen as neutral parties who can exceed ethnic and political affiliations. (Nguroje, 88)

(4) **Political endorsement and alliances:** Religious leaders in Nasarawa State directly participate in political process by endorsing candidates. Political candidates often seek the endorsement of influential *Ulama* to increase support of voter's bases, particularly in areas with a significant Muslims population. Religious leaders play vital role during last 2023 gubernatorial elections in Nasarawa State. Religious leaders in Nasarawa State play a role by endorsing All Progressive Party (APC) candidate, (Governor Abdullahi Alhaji Sule), based on his perceived alignment with Islamic value. (Ibrahim, & Danladi, 95).

4.3 Perception of Muslims on the roles of *Ulama* in decision- making in Nasarawa State

In an interview with yahaya,Aminu,Kasim, on the role play by *Ulama* in shaping political opinion and voting behaviour in Nasarawa State, have expresses their view that *Ulama* are considered as spiritual authorities and moral compasses. Their sermon (*Khutba*) and public teaching mostly contain message that in directly or directly influence political opinions, especially during election period. In an interview with Musa, and Shuaibu on the role play by *Ulama* they have elaborated their view that *Ulama* openly endorsed political candidates, often based on perceived alignment with Islamic value or community interest. This endorsement can significantly shake voting behaviour especially in rural Muslims communities . They further, explains that their approval or disapproval of candidate can allow or disallow political actor. In an interview with Abdullahi, Musa, and Sabitu on the role play by *Ulama* have explained that, *Ulama* mobilized their followers to vote in elections their networks mosque, religion association, and *madarasah* are some times use for political organizing. They also, mentioned that *Ulama* serves as advisors or intermediaries by politicians. Their involvement reduced tension or secure community support. They also, act as moral arbitrators in time of political conflict or crises. In an interview with respondents on the roles of *Ulama* in political decision making, they opines that *Ulama* are formally consulted by the elected officials (Governor, legislator and chairmen) on policy matter, especially affecting religious or social value (morality, education, dress code, and alcohol regulations)

In an interview with Umar, Ahmad, and Yunusa on the roles of *Ulama* in political decision making, they say that *Ulama* are invited to mediate political disputes or communal tensions, which give them informal leverage over policy decision, especially peace building efforts or interfaith relation. In an interview with respondents on the *Ulama* influences in political decision making, they were of the opinion that *Ulama* introduce policies related to education, women's roles religious practices most a time reflect the views of *Ulama*. They also, explained that *Ulama* advocate for the inclusion of Islamic Studies. During an interview with respondents on the *Ulama* influences in political decision making,they gives their opinion that, politicians often revise or withdraw policies that are publicly condemned by prominent *Ulama* to avoid repercussion or loss of support.They also, point out that, they cannot enforce policy decisions but can only advise. Some time politicians may ignore ulama's advice if it contradict state's interest or paty's interest. In an interview with respondents on the Umar,Uthman, and Yakubu of Muslims regarding the political involvement of *Ulama* , they express his opinion that Muslims perceive *Ulama* as moral voices who promote integrity, justice and Allah's consciousness in politics. They also perceived *Ulama* as trustworthy, and spiritual guided. In an interview with respondents on the perception of Muslims regarding the political involvement of *Ulama*, they elaborate that some Muslims criticize *Ulama* for becoming politically bias especially when the publicly endorse candidates or accept political favour. Interview was conducted with respondents on the perception of Muslims regarding the political involvement of *Ulama*, they have of the view that most of the Muslims believe that politicians exploit *ulama* to manipulate voters using religious. They also, explain that religious is being misused for political gain

4.4 Perceptions of Muslims Politicians on the role of *Ulama* in decision- making in Nasarawa State

In an interview with Yusuf,Ismail, and Usman on the perception of Muslim politicians on the roles of *Ulama* in Nasarawa state, they have explained that Muslim politicians often approach prominent *Ulama* for public endorsement during campaigns. These endorsements signal to Muslim voters that a candidate align with Islamic value and has the moral backing of respected religious authorities. Endorsement may come through sermon declaration. The respondents have the view

that, some politicians attends mosque activities, and *Qur'anic* graduations to visibly associate themselves with *Ulama* and religious leaders. They further explain that this participation help them build rapport with *Ulama* (Islamic scholars), and their followers showing respect and solidarity. During an interview with respondents, they opined that politicians consults *Ulama* privately to seek guidance on community or religious sensitivities. This establishes a relationship of benefit, *Ulama* gain influence over policies, while politicians received community insights and support. Suleiman, and Safiyanu expressed their opinions that the politicians offer financial assistance or mosque construction, Islamic education, and social program organized by *Ulama*. This patronage foster good will and strengthen political alliances with Islamic scholars and politicians. In an interview with Muslim politicians have explains that *Ulama* are politically active, in other to promote interfaith dialogue, and peaceful co-existence. They further elaborate that that *Ulama* reinforce religious identities as a sources of political power, affecting inter religious relation. In an interview with respondents they believe that *Ulama* and religious inspire civic engagement and participation among Muslims. They also, explains That *Ulama* and religious leaders encourage volunteerism and community service in the state. In an interview with politicians they expresses their view that religious sentiment should be condemned in politics, in other to reduce religious issues in the state. They urged leaders to avoid such divisions for the sake of peace.

4.5 Key findings

- 1 The researcher found that most of the respondents acknowledge that *ulama* play roles in political dispensation in Nasarawa state. Especially during election period, many respondents reported that Friday sermons, Islamic lectures, and informal advice from *ulama* strongly impacted how voted.
- 2 The findings revealed that most of the politicians engage with prominent *ulama* to gain religious credibility and access to their followers, through the method of attending religious events providing financial or materials support to religious leaders or institutions.
- 3 The study found that many *ulama* were act as advisors to elect officials and candidates. The finding also, revealed that most of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) play a vital role in conflict resolution, community mobilization, particularly concerned religious, education, and morality.
- 4 The study found that most of the politicians when they have elected, they used to abandon people and religion activities.

5.0 Conclusion

The study has critically examined the intersection of religious and politics by investigate the roles of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in Nasarawa State politics. The study highlight the role of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in shaping political behaviors, legitimizing political actors and influencing certain policy outcomes. The research revealed that *ulama* (Islamic scholars) are deeply interconnected in the socio-political structure of Nasarawa State. Through sermon, public endorsements, advisory roles, and community mobilization, they use considerable influence over electors and political elites for many people, particularly in rural and Muslims majority areas. *Ulama* (Islamic Scholars) are not only spiritual guides but also trusted political influences. The study concludes that influence of *ulama* in Nasarawa state politics is real, and important. Therefore, *ulama* (Islamic scholars) contributes to moral guidance, peace, religious harmony, and democratic development in Nasarawa state.

6.0 Recommendations

- 1 *Ulama* should be encourage to maintain neutral role in politics. While offering moral guidance is valuable, direct endorsement of candidates or political parties can undermine their religious credibility and create division within community.

2 The state government should establish the platforms for interfaith dialogue and consultation, Where *Ulama* and leaders from other religious communities can contribute to policy discussion without political bias.

3 The state government should organizing workshop for *Ulama* and other religious leaders to increase their understanding of democratic governance.

4 The state, government in collaboration with religious councils and civil society organizations, should develop codes of conduct or ethical guidelines outline the appropriate limit for religious leaders participating in politics

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Table of interviewees

S/N	Name	Age	Rank	place of interview	Date interview
1	Yahaya Adamu	65	Rel. leader	Awe	4/8/2025
2	Aminu Zakari	45	Rel. leader	Awe	5/8/2025
3	Kasim Umar	44	Rel. leader	Awe	5/8/2025
4	Mal. Musa Yahaya	42	Rel. leader	Awe	6/8/2025
5	Musa Shuaibu	55	Community leader	lafia	10/8/2025
6	Abdullahi Abubakar	45	Community leader	Lafia	10/8/2025
7	Musa Isa	45	community	Lafia	11/8/2025
8	Musa Abdullahi	48	community	Lafia	12/8/2025
9	Umar Yahaya	47	politician	Doma	13/8/2025
10	Ahmad Usman Oboshi	35	politician	Doma	14/8/2025
11	Yunusa Abubakar	35	politician	Doma	6/8/2025
12	Umar Musa	30	politician	Doma	14/8/2025
`	Usman Habib	35	Policy maker	Keffi	15/8/2025
14	Yakub Yahaya	25	Policy maker	keffi	16/8/2025
15	Yusuf Suleiman	37	Policy mker	keffi	17/8/2025
16	Ismail Aliyu	25	Policy maker	keffi	18/8/2025
17	Usman Musa	47	politician	Akwanga	20/8/2025
18	Rabiu Muhd	32	politician	Akwanga	20/8/2025
19	Musa Suleiman	40	politician	Akwanga	21/8/2025
20	Isa Safiyanu	45	Akwanga	Akwanga	21/8/2025