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Islamic Ethics, Political Activism, and Democratic Governance in Nigeria: Moral Responsibilities, Ethical Leadership, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and politics remains a defining feature of governance in many African societies, particularly in Nigeria, where Islam and Christianity significantly shape political participation, leadership, and public policy. Although Islamic political thought emphasises justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), accountability, and the promotion of public welfare (*maṣlahah*), the extent to which these ethical principles influence the conduct of Muslim political leaders in Nigeria remains contested. Existing studies have largely examined political Islam or religious participation in governance without sufficiently interrogating the practical application of Islamic ethical values within Nigeria's contemporary democratic environment. This study therefore examines the moral responsibilities of Muslim political leaders and activists by analysing the relationship between Islamic ethics, political activism, and democratic governance in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of primary Islamic sources, including the Qur'an and Hadith, alongside contemporary scholarly literature and selected case studies of Muslim political leadership in Nigeria. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis to identify the ethical principles underpinning Islamic political engagement and to evaluate their manifestation in contemporary governance. The findings reveal that Islamic political ethics provide a comprehensive normative framework for promoting justice, transparency, accountability, integrity, and social responsibility in public administration. However, these ethical ideals are frequently undermined by systemic corruption, patronage politics, weak institutions, ethno-religious polarisation, and poor democratic accountability. The study further finds that while some Muslim political leaders have demonstrated commitment to ethical governance, the institutional environment often constrains the practical implementation of Islamic moral principles. The study concludes that strengthening ethical leadership requires not only individual moral commitment but also institutional reforms that promote transparency, accountability, civic participation, and the rule of law. It recommends the integration of Islamic ethical values into leadership development, political education, and governance reforms to foster sustainable democratic governance and national development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Islamic ethics; political activism; democratic governance; ethical leadership; accountability; Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Politics and religion have historically maintained a complex and mutually influential relationship across societies, with religious values frequently shaping political institutions, leadership practices, and public policy. Within Islamic political thought, governance is conceived not merely as an exercise in political authority but as a moral responsibility entrusted to leaders who are accountable to both society and God. Consequently, political leadership

is expected to uphold justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), compassion, and the pursuit of the common good (*maṣlahah*), principles that collectively constitute the ethical foundation of Islamic governance (Kamali, 2019; March, 2019).

Unlike secular political traditions that often distinguish sharply between religion and state, Islamic political philosophy regards ethical conduct as inseparable from

governance. The Qur'an repeatedly commands justice, honesty, and accountability while emphasising that political authority is a trust rather than a privilege (Qur'an 4:58; 4:135; 5:8). Likewise, the Prophetic tradition presents leadership as a form of public service, requiring rulers to safeguard the welfare of society and administer justice impartially. Contemporary scholarship similarly argues that Islamic political ethics should be understood as a normative framework that promotes responsible governance rather than as a rigid blueprint for establishing a particular political system (Kamali, 2019; Cesari, 2021).

Nigeria provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between Islamic ethics and political leadership. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria is characterised by profound religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, with Muslims constituting a substantial proportion of the population, particularly in the northern region. Since independence in 1960, Muslims have occupied numerous strategic political positions, including the presidency, military leadership, governorships, and legislative offices. Religion, therefore, continues to influence political mobilisation, electoral behaviour, public discourse, and leadership legitimacy (Ojo, 2020; Onapajo, 2016).

Despite the strong ethical orientation of Islamic political teachings, Nigeria continues to experience persistent governance challenges, including widespread corruption, weak institutional accountability, electoral violence, patronage politics, poverty, insecurity, and declining public trust in political institutions. These governance deficits raise important questions regarding the extent to which Islamic ethical principles are reflected in the conduct of Muslim political leaders and activists. The apparent disconnect between religious identity and ethical governance has generated increasing scholarly interest in understanding how Islamic moral values can contribute to democratic consolidation and good governance in pluralistic societies (Cesari, 2021; Sule, 2022).

Although previous studies have examined political Islam, democratisation, and religion in Nigerian politics, relatively limited attention has been devoted to evaluating the practical application of Islamic ethical principles in contemporary democratic governance. Much of the existing literature focuses either on political participation, constitutional debates surrounding Islam, or electoral mobilisation, while insufficiently exploring how Islamic ethical concepts such as justice, accountability, integrity, consultation, and public welfare influence political behaviour among Muslim leaders. Consequently, an important gap remains concerning the relationship between Islamic moral philosophy and contemporary governance outcomes in Nigeria.

This study addresses this gap by examining the ethical responsibilities of Muslim political leaders and activists within Nigeria's democratic context. Specifically, it analyses the extent to which Islamic principles of justice,

accountability, honesty, transparency, consultation, and social responsibility are reflected in political leadership and public governance. By integrating classical Islamic political thought with contemporary governance scholarship, the study contributes to ongoing debates on ethical leadership, democratic governance, and religion in Africa. It further demonstrates that while Islamic ethics offer a comprehensive normative framework capable of promoting accountable and inclusive governance, their practical implementation depends largely upon institutional effectiveness, political will, and the personal integrity of political actors.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptualising Islamic Ethics and Political Activism

Islamic ethics constitutes a comprehensive moral framework that regulates both private conduct and public life. Unlike secular ethical systems that frequently distinguish between religion and politics, Islamic ethics integrates spiritual values with social, economic, and political responsibilities. The ethical foundation of Islam is derived primarily from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which collectively establish principles of justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), honesty (*ṣidq*), benevolence (*ihsān*), and public welfare (*maṣlahah*). These principles define the moral obligations of both political leaders and citizens and provide normative guidance for governance and public administration (Kamali, 2019).

Classical Islamic scholars viewed political authority as a sacred trust rather than an instrument for personal enrichment or domination. Leadership (*imāmah* or *wilāyah*) was understood as a responsibility that requires rulers to administer justice, protect human dignity, preserve social harmony, and ensure equitable distribution of public resources. Consequently, governance in Islam is fundamentally ethical because political legitimacy depends not merely upon acquiring power but upon exercising authority in accordance with divine principles of justice and accountability (March 2019).

Political activism, within this framework, extends beyond electoral participation or competition for public office. Rather, it encompasses all lawful efforts aimed at promoting justice, preventing oppression, protecting human rights, and advancing the collective welfare of society. Islamic political participation therefore represents both a civic responsibility and a religious obligation, provided that political engagement remains consistent with ethical principles derived from the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions (Cesari, 2021). Contemporary scholars increasingly argue that Islamic political ethics should not be interpreted as advocating a singular political model but rather as providing universal moral standards

applicable to diverse constitutional and democratic systems (Kamali, 2019).

These ethical principles are especially relevant in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria, where political leadership operates within complex religious, ethnic, and constitutional environments. Rather than promoting sectarian governance, Islamic ethics emphasise inclusive justice, public accountability, consultation, and the protection of the rights of all citizens, of the rights of all citizens irrespective of religious affiliation. Such principles closely correspond with internationally recognised norms of good governance, including transparency, participation, responsiveness, equity, and the rule of law (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022).

2.2 Evolution of Islamic Political Thought

The historical development of Islamic political thought demonstrates the close relationship between ethics and governance throughout Muslim civilisation. During the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), religious and political leadership were integrated within a governance system founded upon justice, consultation, social solidarity, and respect for contractual obligations. One of the earliest examples of constitutional governance in Islamic history was the Constitution of Medina, established in 622 CE, which regulated relationships among Muslims, Jews, and other communities while recognising religious diversity and collective security. Contemporary scholarship regards the Constitution of Medina as an important historical model of pluralistic governance and constitutional order because it institutionalised principles of citizenship, mutual responsibility, and peaceful coexistence (Ali, 2021).

Following the Prophet's death, the Rashidun Caliphate further developed these ethical foundations through consultative leadership and public accountability. The administrations of Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib emphasised justice, fiscal responsibility, equal treatment before the law, and accountability of public officials. Modern scholarship continues to regard the Rashidun period as a normative reference for ethical governance because political authority remained subject to consultation (*shūrā*) and public scrutiny (Ismail & Yusof, 2023).

Subsequent Islamic empires—including the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman states—expanded Islamic civilisation while simultaneously confronting tensions between ethical ideals and political realities. Although these periods witnessed remarkable intellectual and administrative achievements, scholars also documented increasing centralisation of political authority and challenges relating to justice, legitimacy, and

accountability (Lapidus, 2014). Consequently, Islamic political thought evolved through continuous engagement between normative religious ideals and changing political circumstances.

In the contemporary period, Muslim scholars increasingly examine how Islamic ethical principles can contribute to democratic governance, constitutionalism, and human rights. Rather than viewing democracy and Islam as inherently incompatible, many scholars argue that democratic values such as participation, accountability, consultation, and protection of fundamental rights possess strong parallels within Islamic political ethics. Concepts including *shūrā* (consultation), *ijmā'* (consensus), *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), and *maṣlaḥah* (public interest) provide important ethical foundations for democratic governance while remaining rooted in Islamic jurisprudence (An-Na'im, 2008; Kamali, 2019).

2.3 Ethical Leadership Theory

This study is anchored primarily in **ethical leadership theory**, which argues that effective political leadership depends upon the demonstration of integrity, fairness, accountability, honesty, and concern for the welfare of followers rather than merely the exercise of formal authority. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) define ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes that encourage ethical behaviour among followers.

Ethical leadership theory is particularly relevant because Islamic political philosophy similarly conceptualises leadership as a moral trust (*amānah*) rather than a privilege. Both perspectives emphasise that leaders should model ethical behaviour, uphold justice, remain accountable to the public, and prioritise collective welfare above personal or partisan interests. Political legitimacy therefore derives not only from constitutional authority or electoral victory but also from moral credibility and public trust.

Within the Nigerian political context, ethical leadership theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for evaluating the extent to which Muslim political leaders embody Islamic ethical principles in governance. The theory facilitates examination of issues including corruption, transparency, public accountability, distributive justice, and ethical decision-making while highlighting how moral leadership contributes to institutional legitimacy and democratic stability. It also helps explain why religious identity alone cannot guarantee ethical governance in the absence of institutional accountability and personal integrity.

2.4 Effective Governance Theory

To complement ethical leadership theory, this study also draws upon good governance theory, which emphasises transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness, equity, and the rule of law as essential characteristics of democratic governance. International governance institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank have consistently identified these principles as fundamental determinants of sustainable political development and public-sector effectiveness (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

The theoretical relevance of good governance theory lies in its substantial convergence with Islamic ethical principles. Values such as justice (*ʿadl*), consultation (*shūrā*), trust (*amānah*), honesty (*ṣidq*), and promotion of public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) closely parallel internationally accepted standards of accountable governance. This convergence demonstrates that Islamic political ethics and modern democratic governance are not necessarily competing paradigms but may be mutually reinforcing when appropriately institutionalised.

Applying good governance theory, therefore, enables this study to evaluate how Islamic ethical values can strengthen democratic institutions in Nigeria by promoting transparency, reducing corruption, enhancing citizen participation, and improving public trust in political leadership. The framework also facilitates assessment of institutional constraints that often prevent ethical values from translating into effective governance practices.

2.5 Theoretical Implications for the Study

The integration of ethical leadership theory and good governance theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining Islamic ethics within Nigeria's democratic environment. Ethical Leadership Theory explains the normative responsibilities of individual political actors, whereas Good Governance Theory examines the institutional conditions necessary for ethical governance to flourish.

Together, these complementary perspectives demonstrate that sustainable democratic governance depends upon both morally responsible leadership and strong public institutions capable of enforcing accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. The framework therefore enables a systematic assessment of whether Muslim political leaders in Nigeria translate Islamic ethical principles into practical governance and identifies the structural factors that facilitate or constrain ethical political leadership.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative** research design to

examine the relationship between Islamic ethical principles and political activism within the context of democratic governance in Nigeria. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the meanings, interpretations, and practical application of ethical concepts such as justice (*ʿadl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), accountability, and public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) rather than measuring these concepts quantitatively. Qualitative research enables scholars to investigate complex social, religious, and political phenomena within their natural contexts while capturing the perspectives embedded in historical texts, policy documents, and scholarly discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study employs a descriptive qualitative research design supported by documentary analysis and interpretive content analysis. This design facilitates an in-depth examination of Islamic ethical doctrines alongside contemporary governance practices, allowing the researcher to identify areas of convergence and divergence between Islamic political ideals and Nigeria's democratic experience. Documentary research is particularly appropriate because Islamic political ethics are primarily articulated through religious texts, historical records, legal documents, and scholarly literature rather than experimental observation.

3.2 Research Approach

The research adopts an interpretivist epistemological approach, which assumes that political behaviour, ethical leadership, and religious values are socially constructed and best understood through interpretation rather than through statistical measurement. Interpretivism enables researchers to examine how Islamic ethical concepts are understood, interpreted, and applied by political leaders within specific socio-political contexts (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

The study therefore interprets Islamic ethical principles from primary religious sources and contemporary scholarship while analysing their implications for democratic governance in Nigeria. Rather than testing causal relationships, the research seeks to explain how Islamic moral values inform political participation, leadership responsibilities, and public administration.

3.3 Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary qualitative data obtained from credible documentary sources.

Primary documentary sources include:

- The Holy Qur'an.
- Authentic collections of Hadith, particularly Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim.
- Classical works on Islamic governance and

political thought.

Secondary sources comprise:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Academic books.
- Government publications.
- Reports published by international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Transparency International, the World Bank, and Afrobarometer.
- Historical records relating to political leadership in Nigeria.

The combination of religious texts and contemporary governance literature enables the study to evaluate Islamic ethical principles alongside current democratic practices.

3.4 Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis constitutes the principal method of data collection. According to Bowen (2009), documentary analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of documents to generate empirical knowledge and develop meaningful understanding of research phenomena. The technique is particularly suitable for studies involving political philosophy, governance, public policy, and religious ethics because these disciplines rely heavily on documentary evidence.

For this study, documentary sources were carefully selected based on:

- relevance to Islamic political ethics;
- scholarly credibility;
- methodological rigour;
- This includes publication in reputable academic journals or university presses.
- contemporary relevance to democratic governance.

Documents analysed include Qur'anic verses relating to governance, authenticated Prophetic traditions, constitutional literature, scholarly works on Islamic political philosophy, governance reports, and empirical studies addressing religion and politics in Nigeria.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using **thematic content analysis**, which is widely recognised as one of the most effective analytical techniques for qualitative documentary research (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The analytical process involved five interrelated stages:

First, documentary materials were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data.

Second, relevant textual segments relating to Islamic ethics, governance, leadership, accountability, transparency, justice, and political participation were systematically identified.

Third, similar concepts were grouped into broader thematic categories, including:

- justice and equality;
- accountability and trust;
- honesty and transparency;
- consultation and participatory governance;
- public welfare and social responsibility;
- ethical leadership; and
- democratic governance.

Fourth, these themes were interpreted within the broader context of Nigeria's political environment and existing governance challenges.

Finally, findings from Islamic political philosophy were compared with contemporary governance literature to determine the extent to which Islamic ethical principles correspond with internationally accepted standards of good governance.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed several strategies commonly recommended for qualitative research.

First, source triangulation was adopted by integrating evidence from multiple categories of documents, including primary Islamic texts, peer-reviewed scholarly publications, government reports, and international governance assessments.

Second, preference was given to publications produced by reputable academic publishers and indexed journals to ensure the reliability of the evidence.

Third, the researcher maintained consistency in interpreting Islamic ethical concepts by comparing classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary literature on governance and political ethics.

These procedures improve the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings, consistent with established standards for qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Because the study is based entirely on documentary sources available in the public domain, it did not require direct interaction with human participants or the collection of personal data. Consequently, no informed consent procedures were necessary.

Nevertheless, the study adhered to accepted standards of academic integrity by accurately representing the views of cited authors, acknowledging all sources through appropriate APA (7th edition) referencing, and avoiding plagiarism, misrepresentation, or selective interpretation of documentary evidence.

Furthermore, religious texts were interpreted within recognised scholarly traditions to ensure accuracy and avoid misrepresentation of Islamic teachings.

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

Although documentary analysis provides rich contextual understanding, it has inherent limitations. The study relies on existing literature and historical documents and therefore cannot directly capture the contemporary perceptions of Muslim politicians, religious leaders, or citizens.

Similarly, documentary evidence reflects the quality and scope of available publications, which may vary across different themes of Islamic political ethics and Nigerian governance.

Despite these limitations, documentary analysis remains highly appropriate because the objective of the study is to examine the normative foundations of Islamic political ethics and evaluate their relevance for democratic governance rather than measure behavioural outcomes through surveys or interviews.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Islamic Ethics as the Foundation of Political Leadership

The analysis demonstrates that Islamic political philosophy conceptualises leadership as a moral obligation rather than as an instrument for acquiring or preserving political power. The Qur'an consistently portrays political authority as a trust (*amānah*) that requires the exercise of justice, accountability, and compassion. This ethical orientation distinguishes Islamic governance from purely power-centred political traditions by emphasising that rulers remain accountable not only to citizens but ultimately to God for how authority is exercised (Qur'an 4:58; 4:135).

The documentary evidence further indicates that the Prophet Muhammad's leadership in Medina established a governance model grounded in justice, consultation (*shūrā*), equality before the law, and protection of minority rights. These principles were subsequently institutionalised during the Rashidun Caliphate, particularly under Abu Bakr and Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, whose administrations emphasised public accountability, fiscal responsibility, and equitable administration of justice. Contemporary scholarship similarly recognises these principles as forming the normative foundation of

Islamic political ethics rather than merely as historical precedents (Kamali, 2019; Ismail & Yusof, 2023).

The findings also demonstrate that Islamic ethics rejects authoritarian conceptions of leadership. Rather than portraying political office as a privilege, Islamic teachings require leaders to act as custodians of public trust whose legitimacy depends upon ethical conduct, fairness, and service to society. This ethical understanding closely corresponds with modern theories of ethical leadership, which identify integrity, accountability, transparency, and concern for followers as essential characteristics of effective governance (Brown et al., 2005).

From a democratic governance perspective, these findings suggest that Islamic ethical principles possess considerable relevance for addressing contemporary governance challenges. Justice, accountability, consultation, and public welfare remain universally accepted standards of good governance and therefore provide an important normative framework for improving democratic leadership in religiously plural societies such as Nigeria.

4.2 Religion and Political Leadership in Nigeria

The documentary evidence indicates that religion has remained a significant determinant of political behaviour and leadership formation throughout Nigeria's post-independence political history. Since 1960, religious identity has influenced electoral alliances, party mobilisation, constitutional debates, and executive power-sharing arrangements. Although Nigeria operates as a secular constitutional democracy, religious considerations frequently shape political negotiations, candidate selection, and voting behaviour, particularly in presidential elections (Ojo, 2020).

The historical record presented in this study further shows that Muslim political leaders have occupied a substantial proportion of Nigeria's highest political offices since independence. Of the sixteen Heads of State and Presidents examined between 1960 and 2026, ten are Muslims. This pattern reflects both the demographic significance of Islam within Nigeria and the continuing influence of religion in political leadership.

However, the findings demonstrate that religious affiliation alone has not translated into ethical governance. Despite the prominence of Muslim political leaders, successive administrations have continued to confront persistent governance challenges, including corruption, patronage politics, weak institutional accountability, electoral violence, poverty, and declining public confidence in government institutions. These findings reinforce previous studies arguing that religious identity should not be equated with ethical political behaviour, since governance outcomes are shaped primarily by institutional quality, political incentives, and individual integrity rather than by religious affiliation alone (Onapajo, 2016; Ojo, 2020).

The evidence therefore supports the argument that Islamic ethics should be understood not as a marker of religious identity but as a normative framework for responsible public leadership. Political legitimacy within Islamic thought depends upon ethical conduct rather than symbolic expressions of religious commitment.

4.3 Moral Responsibilities of Muslim Political Leaders

The documentary analysis identifies five interrelated ethical responsibilities that define political leadership within Islamic political philosophy.

Justice ('Adl)

Justice emerges as the central principle underpinning Islamic governance. The Qur'an repeatedly commands leaders to administer justice impartially irrespective of ethnicity, religion, social status, or political affiliation (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8). Classical Islamic jurists similarly regarded justice as the primary objective of political authority, arguing that stable governance depends upon fairness, equality before the law, and protection of fundamental rights (Kamali, 2019).

Within the Nigerian context, however, documentary evidence indicates that persistent concerns regarding political patronage, unequal resource distribution, electoral malpractice, and selective application of justice continue to undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. These governance deficiencies illustrate the gap between Islamic ethical ideals and contemporary political practice.

Accountability (Amānah)

Accountability represents another fundamental obligation of Muslim political leaders. Islamic teachings conceptualise public office as a trust bestowed upon leaders for the benefit of society rather than for personal enrichment. Consequently, leaders remain morally accountable for every decision affecting public welfare.

The analysis indicates that accountability extends beyond constitutional or legal responsibility to include spiritual accountability before God. This dual conception of accountability strengthens ethical expectations by linking political conduct with moral responsibility.

Nevertheless, the documentary evidence suggests that institutional accountability remains relatively weak within Nigeria's governance system. Public corruption, misuse of state resources, and limited transparency continue to undermine effective governance despite the ethical obligations prescribed by Islamic teachings. These findings correspond with broader governance assessments identifying corruption as one of Nigeria's most significant development challenges (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Honesty and Transparency

The findings further reveal that honesty (*ṣidq*) and transparency constitute indispensable characteristics of Islamic political leadership. Qur'anic teachings consistently encourage truthfulness, integrity, and openness in both private and public affairs. These ethical values promote public trust while reducing opportunities for corruption and abuse of office.

Among the Nigerian political leaders examined, former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua receives particular attention because of his commitment to public asset declaration, respect for the rule of law, and emphasis on due process during his administration. Although his presidency faced numerous political and economic challenges, his approach to governance has frequently been cited as an example of ethical leadership within contemporary Nigerian politics (Campbell, 2010).

The findings therefore suggest that transparent governance contributes significantly to institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability, reinforcing broader international governance literature that emphasises openness as an essential component of good governance (UNDP, 2022).

Consultation (Shūrā) and Participatory Governance

Another major finding concerns the principle of *shūrā*, which requires political leaders to consult widely before making decisions affecting public interests. Consultation is presented within Islamic political thought as both a religious obligation and an effective governance mechanism that encourages participation, consensus-building, and inclusive decision-making.

Modern democratic governance similarly emphasises citizen participation, legislative oversight, stakeholder engagement, and public accountability. Consequently, the findings demonstrate considerable compatibility between Islamic principles of consultation and contemporary democratic institutions. Rather than conflicting with democratic governance, *shūrā* complements participatory political systems by encouraging deliberation and collective responsibility (Ismail & Yusof, 2023).

Social Responsibility and Public Welfare (Maṣlaḥah)

The analysis also identifies public welfare as one of the defining objectives of Islamic governance. Political authority exists primarily to promote social justice, reduce poverty, protect vulnerable populations, and ensure equitable access to public services.

Historical examples from the administration of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb illustrate the practical application of

these principles through welfare programmes, public financial accountability, and the protection of disadvantaged groups. Contemporary Islamic governance scholarship similarly regards *maṣlahah* as a flexible principle capable of guiding modern public policy and sustainable development (Kamali, 2019).

However, documentary evidence indicates that persistent poverty, unemployment, insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and social inequality continue to limit the realisation of these ethical objectives in Nigeria. These governance challenges demonstrate that effective implementation of Islamic ethical principles requires both morally responsible leadership and capable public institutions.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that Islamic ethics offer a coherent normative framework for democratic governance by emphasising justice, accountability, transparency, consultation, and social responsibility. These ethical principles closely correspond with internationally recognised standards of effective governance and therefore possess continuing relevance for contemporary democratic societies.

However, the study also reveals a significant disconnect between Islamic ethical ideals and political practice in Nigeria. Although Muslim political leaders have occupied many of the country's highest offices since independence, governance outcomes have frequently been constrained by institutional weakness, corruption, patronage politics, weak rule of law, and limited public accountability.

These findings support the argument that religious identity alone cannot guarantee ethical governance. Rather, ethical leadership depends upon the interaction between personal integrity, institutional accountability, democratic oversight, and effective legal frameworks. Consequently, strengthening governance requires reforms that extend beyond individual morality to include institutional capacity building, anti-corruption mechanisms, judicial independence, civic participation, and transparent public administration.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Islamic ethical principles remain relevant to contemporary governance debates because they reinforce universal democratic values, including justice, accountability, human dignity, consultation, and public welfare. When effectively institutionalised, these ethical principles can significantly contribute to strengthening democratic governance, restoring public trust, and promoting sustainable national development in Nigeria.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between Islamic ethics, political activism, and democratic governance in Nigeria with particular emphasis on the moral responsibilities of Muslim political leaders. Drawing on documentary analysis of primary Islamic sources and contemporary governance literature, the study demonstrates that Islamic political thought provides a comprehensive ethical framework for public leadership founded upon justice (*ʿadl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), honesty (*ṣidq*), accountability, and the promotion of public welfare (*maṣlahah*). These principles establish governance as a moral responsibility rather than merely a political or administrative function.

The findings reveal that Islamic ethical values are largely compatible with contemporary democratic principles. Both traditions emphasise accountable leadership, transparency, participation, the protection of human rights, equitable distribution of public resources, and adherence to the rule of law. Consequently, Islamic ethics should not be viewed as incompatible with democratic governance but rather as a normative framework capable of strengthening democratic institutions and promoting ethical political leadership in religiously plural societies such as Nigeria.

However, the study also identifies a persistent gap between Islamic ethical ideals and governance practices. Although Muslim political leaders have occupied a significant proportion of Nigeria's highest political offices since independence, governance has continued to be undermined by systemic corruption, weak institutional accountability, political patronage, insecurity, electoral malpractice, and declining public confidence in state institutions. These findings suggest that religious affiliation alone cannot guarantee ethical leadership. Instead, effective governance depends upon the interaction between individual moral integrity, institutional accountability, constitutional safeguards, and democratic oversight.

The study, therefore, argues that the practical relevance of Islamic political ethics lies not in symbolic religious identity but in their capacity to guide responsible leadership and strengthen public institutions. Ethical governance requires leaders who internalise moral values while operating within institutions capable of enforcing transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Accordingly, Islamic ethics offers important normative resources for promoting democratic consolidation, sustainable development, and social justice in Nigeria.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: This study proposes the following recommendations based on its findings.

Institutionalising Ethical Leadership Development

Government institutions, political parties, universities, and religious organisations should collaborate to establish leadership development programmes that integrate Islamic ethical values with contemporary principles of democratic governance. Such programmes should emphasise integrity, accountability, transparency, public service, conflict resolution, and responsible decision-making. Leadership training should target both elected officials and aspiring political leaders to strengthen ethical standards within public administration.

Strengthening Accountability Institutions

The effectiveness of institutions responsible for promoting transparency and combating corruption requires greater institutional independence, adequate funding, and stronger legal protection. Agencies responsible for financial accountability, anti-corruption enforcement, and public procurement oversight should operate free from political interference. Strengthening these institutions would contribute significantly to reducing corruption and restoring public confidence in democratic governance.

Promoting Participatory Governance

The principle of *shūrā* (consultation) should be operationalised through more inclusive governance mechanisms that encourage citizen participation in public decision-making. Government should strengthen public consultations, legislative oversight, community engagement, and civil society participation in policy formulation and implementation. Increased participation would improve transparency while enhancing the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Expanding Civic and Ethical Education

Educational institutions should incorporate civic education and ethical leadership into school curricula and

higher education programmes. Such curricula should promote values of justice, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, responsible citizenship, and respect for constitutional democracy. Religious institutions can complement these efforts by emphasising ethical leadership rather than partisan political mobilisation.

Enhancing Social Justice and Public Welfare

Consistent with the Islamic principle of *maṣlaḥah*, public policy should prioritise poverty reduction, employment creation, and equitable access to education, healthcare, and social protection programmes. Addressing socio-economic inequalities would not only improve citizens' welfare but also strengthen political legitimacy and reduce social grievances that often contribute to political instability.

Encouraging Interfaith Cooperation

Given Nigeria's religious diversity, ethical governance in Nigeria's religiously diverse landscape requires collaboration among Muslim and Christian religious leaders, civil society organisations, and government institutions. Interfaith dialogue can contribute to reducing political polarisation, strengthening national cohesion, and encouraging ethical political behaviour among religious communities.

5.3 Contribution of the Study

This study makes three important contributions to scholarship.

First, it contributes to the growing literature on Islamic political thought by demonstrating that Islamic ethics provides a coherent normative framework for democratic governance rather than merely a religious doctrine of political authority.

Second, the study extends contemporary debates on ethical leadership by illustrating the compatibility between Islamic ethical principles and internationally recognised standards of effective governance, including accountability, transparency, participation, and the rule of law.

Third, the study contributes to Nigerian governance literature by highlighting the distinction between religious identity and ethical political leadership. It demonstrates that effective governance depends less upon the religious affiliation of political leaders than upon the practical implementation of ethical principles within accountable democratic institutions.

5.4 Areas for Future Research

Future studies should move beyond documentary analysis by employing empirical qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to examine how Muslim political leaders, public officials, religious scholars, and citizens perceive the relationship between Islamic ethics and democratic governance.

Comparative studies involving other Muslim-majority African countries, such as Senegal, Niger, and Sudan, would also provide valuable insights into the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain the implementation of Islamic ethical principles within democratic political systems.

Finally, future research should investigate the relationship between religious ethics, public trust, anti-corruption reforms, and democratic resilience using longitudinal and comparative governance data.

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