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Shaykh Ādam al-‘Ilūrī's Poem on Western-oriented Politics (*Al-Siyāsah al-Gharbiyyah*) as a Literary Diagnosis of the Nigerian Political Situation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a short Arabic poem on politics by Shaykh Ādam ‘Abdullāhi al-Ilūrī (1917–1992) as a literary response to the moral disorder of public power. Although its precise date of composition remains unknown, the poem survives in the fourth edition of *al-Tuhfah al-Rizqiyyah*, compiled by his son and published in 2022. The article therefore does not claim that the poem predicted later events in Nigeria. Instead, it argues that the poem provides a concise vocabulary for interpreting Nigeria's post-independence political strife. Through root-play, lexical reversal, loanwords, religious imagery and a rhyme organised around the consonant *sīn* (the Arabic letter s), the poem depicts western-oriented politics as inwardly decayed, founded on greed, enforced through coercion and separated from moral purpose. Its reference to *siyāsah al-gharb* (Western-oriented politics) is read cautiously as a criticism of Western-derived political forms as al-Ilūrī understood them, including the coercive and extractive institutions inherited by the postcolonial State. Selected episodes from Nigeria's history, including military rule, the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election, State corruption, electoral violence and abusive policing, illustrate the interpretive reach and limits of that vocabulary. The article concludes that *amānah* (trust), justice and consultation become politically meaningful only when they are embodied in transparent and enforceable institutions.

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Introduction

Arabic satire has long provided poets with a language to expose vanity, hypocrisy and abuses of power. The classical tradition of *hijā'* (invective verse) is broad and historically varied, but one durable feature is the compression of moral judgement into memorable verbal form (van Gelder, 1988; Darwish, 2024). Shaykh Ādam ‘Abdullāhi al-Ilūrī brought this literary inheritance into twentieth-century Yorubaland. His scholarship joined Arabic learning to the social and intellectual concerns of West African Muslim communities, and his work formed part of a wider culture of Arabic writing that remained locally rooted while participating in an international Islamic tradition (Reichmuth & Abubakre, 1997; Yusuf, 2023).

The poem studied here appears on page 88 of the fourth edition of *al-Tuhfah al-Rizqiyyah*, a collection prepared by al-Ilūrī's son, Muhammad Thawban Adam Abdullahi al-Ilūrī, and published by Markaz al-Ulum Press in 2022. The publication date belongs to the compilation, not to the poem, as no reliable date

of composition has been established. However, the poem predates the annulled presidential election of 1993, the Abacha dictatorship, and the electoral crises of the Fourth Republic. Although the sequence of events mentioned earlier is historically important, it does not make the poem a prophecy. Its images describe recurring failures of political authority that are neither unique to Nigeria nor tied to one administration. The article makes a narrower claim that Al-ʿIlūrī's poem offers a literary vocabulary through which Nigeria's post-independence political strife can be read. The poem remains the primary object of study; the historical examples test the reach of its language rather than prove its predictive power. Particular attention is paid to the phrase *siyāsāt al-gharb*, Western politics or Western-oriented politics. Consequently, instead of silently transferring an anti-Western statement to Nigerian affairs, the discussion asks whether al-ʿIlūrī's choice of words permits a reading centred on imported institutions and their postcolonial uses.

Text and Working Translation

The Arabic text reproduced below follows the version supplied from *al-Tuḥfah al-Rizqiyyah*. The English translation is my working rendering. It aims to preserve the poem's political images and recurrent wordplay, although no English version can reproduce the full sound pattern of the Arabic.

سَاسَ يَسُوسُ سَائِسٌ مُسَوِّسٌ
 سِيَّاسَةُ الْغَرْبِ هِيَ الْكَابُوسُ
 سِيَّاسَةٌ أَسَاسُهَا الْفُلُوسُ
 سِيَّاسَةٌ تَسْكُنُ فِيهَا سُوسُ
 سِيَّاسَةٌ لَيْسَ لَهَا قَامُوسُ
 أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ لَهَا قَامُوسُ
 قَامُوسُهَا قَانُونُهَا الْمَكُوسُ
 يَشْرَحُهَا لِقَوْمِهَا بُولِيسُ
 بُنُودُهَا جَوْرٌ كَذَا انْتِكَاسُ
 أَمَلَى لَهُمْ بُنُودُهَا إِبْلِيسُ
 نِظَامُهَا مُخَدَّجٌ مَكْشُوسُ
 طَرِيقُهَا الْغَوَّاءُ وَالتَّلْبِيسُ

(al-ʿIlūrī, 2022, p. 88)

A decayed ruler governs and goes on governing; Western-oriented politics is a nightmare.

A politics whose foundation is money; a politics in which the woodworm lives.

A politics with no settled lexicon; I seek God's forgiveness - it does have a lexicon.

Its lexicon and its law are oppressive levies, explained to its people by the police.

Its clauses are injustice and reversal; *Iblīs* [Satan] dictated those clauses to them.

Its system is defective and inverted; its way is clamour and deception.

(Working translation by the author)

Method and Scope

This study combines close reading with selective historical comparison. The close reading attends to morphology, semantic repetition, rhetorical reversal, rhyme, and the political force of the poem's religious and borrowed vocabulary. Lexical claims are kept separate from broader interpretation. The available edition of *al-Tuḥfah al-Rizqiyyah* does not establish a composition date or provide a full metrical analysis, so this article does not assign the poem to a named metre or use chronology as proof of prediction. The historical discussion is therefore organised around episodes that correspond directly to the poem's principal images: political decay, the dominance of money, coercive enforcement, inversion of lawful order and public deception. It begins with the instability that followed independence in 1960 and then treats the 1993 annulment, the Abacha years, electoral violence, and abusive policing as representative cases. These examples do not exhaust Nigeria's political history. They are used to examine how far the poem's moral vocabulary clarifies recurrent institutional problems and where historical explanation requires more than poetic analogy.

Al-ʿIlūrī and the Historical Setting

Al-ʿIlūrī was born in 1917 at Waza, in what is now the Republic of Benin, into a Yoruba Muslim scholarly family with ties to Ilorin. After advanced Arabic and Islamic study, including a period in Cairo, he founded the Arabic and Islamic Training Centre known as Markaz in 1952. The school later moved to Agege, Lagos, and became a major institution for Arabic and Islamic education in southwestern Nigeria. His books ranged across theology, history, law, education, and Arabic literature. He died in London on 3 May 1992 (Reichmuth & Abubakre, 1997; Reichmuth, 2012; Yusuf, 2023). His adult life coincided with the final years of colonial rule and the unsettled course of Nigerian independence. The First Republic gave way to coups in 1966 and civil war from 1967 to 1970. Later decades alternated between military government and short-lived civilian rule before the return to elected government in 1999. Al-ʿIlūrī therefore wrote from within a society where constitutional promises repeatedly encountered coercion, patronage and institutional weakness. This setting makes a Nigerian political reading historically reasonable, while the absence of a precise composition date requires caution about linking the poem to any single crisis (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

The Literary Argument

Government and Decay in the Root Play

The opening, *sāsa yasūsu sāʿisun musawwasun* (a decayed ruler governs and goes on governing), displays al-ʿIlūrī's control of derivation and sound. Forms associated with governing are placed beside a description that can suggest something corrupted, infested, or acted upon. The nearby noun *sūs* [woodworm] makes the destructive sense explicit in the fourth hemistich. The effect is sustained *jinās* (paronomasia), in which the language of rule carries the sound of internal decay. The political structure may remain standing, but the image asks what survives beneath its surface. This is more than an ornamental pun. By repeating closely related sounds across agent, action and condition, the poem refuses to isolate corruption from government. Decay is presented as something that inhabits Western-oriented political practice as it is practised in Nigeria. The image is especially suited to institutions that preserve constitutions, ministries and elections while their public purposes are weakened by private extraction.

Money as Political Foundation

The next pair of hemistichs shifts from the ruler to the system: *siyāsātun asāsuḥā al-fulūs* [a politics whose foundation is money], *siyāsātun taskunu fihā sūs* [a politics inhabited by woodworm]. The repeated word *siyāsah* [politics] gives the passage an accusatory rhythm, while *asās* makes money structural rather than incidental. *Fulūs* and *sūs* are bound together by sound. The poem does not complain merely that some politicians accept bribes. It imagines an order in which money has displaced the proper basis of authority and trust.

The Lexicon of Reversal

The poem then stages a correction: politics has no *qāmūs* (lexicon or dictionary); al-ʿIlūrī immediately seeks God's forgiveness and admits that it does have one. This *istidrāk* [rhetorical correction] changes the direction of the statement without cancelling its criticism. Politics possesses a vocabulary, but the words that define it are *mukūs* [oppressive levies] and *būlīs* (police). Law is no longer explained through deliberation or adjudication. It is communicated through extraction and force, while the sound pattern of the poem reinforces the argument.

The twelve hemistichs repeatedly close on the consonant *sīn*, the rhyme consonant or *rawī* [rhyme consonant], while the vowels and syllables before it vary in such words as *kābūs*, *fulūs*, *qāmūs*, *mukūs*, *būlīs*, *intikās* [reversal], *līlīs*, *mankūs* and *talbīs* (deception). It is therefore safer to describe it as a *sīn*-based monorhyme than an unbroken *-ūs* ending. The recurrence gives formal unity to a poem about political incoherence, and its stable poetic closure exposes the absence of stable public principle.

Borrowed Words and Western Politics

The phrase *siyāsāt al-gharb* creates this article's central interpretive problem. The most literal object of criticism is Western politics or politics oriented toward the West. Nigeria cannot simply be substituted for *al-gharb*. Yet the lexical sequence helps explain why the poem can still illuminate Nigerian experience. The word *būlīs* is a modern borrowing used for police, and *qānūn* [law] belongs to a legal vocabulary with a long history of borrowing and adaptation. The word *qāmūs* is also historically borrowed, though it has long been naturalised in Arabic and cannot, by itself, prove a modern foreign reference. Together, these words allow,

but do not compel, a reading of Western-oriented politics as an institutional language received from elsewhere.

That reading is consistent with scholarship on the colonial and postcolonial African State. Colonial administration did not merely place foreign officers over unchanged societies. It reorganised authority, law, taxation and coercion, often through a divided system of civil and customary power. Independence transferred control of many of those institutions without automatically remaking their relationship to citizens (Mamdani, 1996). Al-ʿIlūrī's poem can therefore be read as a Muslim scholar's moral criticism of Western-oriented political forms as they were encountered locally. This remains an interpretation, not a claim that loanwords settle the matter.

Iblīs and the Inversion of Law

In the fifth couplet, the poem moves from bad administration to corrupted authorship: *amlā lahum bunūdahā Iblīs* [Iblīs dictated its clauses to them]. The key image here is legislative. *Bunūd* (clauses or articles) identifies the provisions of the political order, so evil does not merely tempt an otherwise sound government after its establishment. It appears at the point where the system's terms are formulated. The verb *amlā* evokes dictation to a writer, giving Iblīs the role of a perverse lawgiver. The poem thus imagines injustice as embedded in the Western-oriented political design.

The final couplet gathers the charge into two adjectives, *mukhdaj/mukhaddaj* [defective or prematurely formed] and *mankūs* [inverted]. The first describes something defective or brought forth before proper completion; the second describes what has been turned upside down. The language has resonances within Islamic literature, including reports associated with the *Khawārij* (an early Islamic sect), but the poem itself does not name that movement, as a direct allusion cannot be established from the surviving text alone. What can be said securely is that the system is portrayed as malformed in origin and misdirected in operation. Its method, *al-ghawghā' wa al-talbīs* [clamour or mob disorder and deception], joins public clamour to deception.

Nigerian Post-Independence Political Strife

From Independence to Military Rule

Nigeria gained independence in 1960 with a federal constitution and competitive party politics, but regional rivalry, disputed elections and struggles over State resources weakened the First Republic. The coups of January and July 1966 were followed by massacres, secession and the civil war of 1967–1970. Military government then dominated much of the period before 1999. These crises had distinct causes and cannot be reduced to one poetic image. Nevertheless, the poem's language of inversion speaks to a recurring feature of the period: institutions created to represent public consent were repeatedly displaced by force, emergency and personal rule (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Siollun, 2009).

The Annulment of 12 June 1993

The presidential election of 12 June 1993 provides the clearest example of a political process denied completion. Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola was leading the count in an election widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest up to that time. Ibrahim Babangida's military government annulled the process before the National Electoral Commission could issue a final declaration. The decision ended the planned transition to civilian government, provoked a national crisis, and prepared the way for the Abacha dictatorship (Diamond, 1999; Falola & Heaton, 2008). *Mukhdaj* gives this episode a precise literary image: a democratic process brought close to political birth and then prevented from acquiring lawful life. However, the comparison should not be mistaken for prediction because it is not. It shows how a word chosen before 1992 can illuminate a later crisis in which procedure existed, but sovereign power refused its result.

Money and the Hollowing of Public Institutions

The poem's claim that money has become the foundation of politics also finds strong echoes in Nigeria's political economy. Joseph's account of prebendal politics describes public office as a resource appropriated for sectional and personal benefit, while later studies connect patronage, electoral finance and political godfatherism to weak accountability (Joseph, 1987; Human Rights Watch, 2007). Under General Sani Abacha, State funds were diverted through mechanisms that included purported security expenditure. Successive recovery agreements involving Nigeria, Switzerland, and other jurisdictions show both the scale of the theft and the long institutional effort required to return assets (World Bank, 2017). Recent indicators show that corruption remains entrenched. Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index gave Nigeria a score of 26 out of 100 and ranked it 142nd among 182 countries (Transparency International,

2026). Such an index measures perceptions of public-sector corruption rather than every corrupt act, but its persistence supports the poem's distinction between isolated wrongdoing and decay that settles within a system.

Police Power and Electoral Violence

Būlīs becomes politically concrete where citizens encounter public authority through extortion or violence. Human Rights Watch documented patterns of police corruption and abuse well before the nationwide EndSARS protests of October 2020. Those protests were directed at the Special Anti-Robbery Squad and at wider failures of police accountability. The poem's sequence from *mukūs* to *būlīs* is therefore suggestive: extraction is explained through the agency of force, and the citizen learns the operative meaning of law at the point of coercive contact (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Amnesty International, 2020). In addition, electoral violence reveals a related inversion. The Nigerian weak electoral administration had already damaged confidence in the elections of the early Fourth Republic (Omotola, 2010), and following the April 2011 presidential election, violence in twelve northern states killed more than 800 people and displaced tens of thousands, according to Human Rights Watch (2011). Political competition had moved from consultation and lawful contest into mob action, reprisal and coercion. Nevertheless, the poem's *al-ghawghā'* does not explain the regional, partisan and religious causes of that violence. However, it names the public disorder that results when political mobilisation is detached from accountable institutions.

Al-ʿIlūrī's poem and Nigerian Political Institutional Repair

As al-ʿIlūrī's poem builds from satire to intensity, it points to Nigerian political reality and the need for institutional repair after evident political inadequacies. Nevertheless, Civilian government has continued since 1999, opposition parties have won important elections, courts have reversed electoral outcomes, and civic movements have forced public debate about abuse. Nigeria's removal from the Financial Action Task Force list of jurisdictions under increased monitoring in October 2025 following verified reforms to its anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorist-financing system is one of the notable political and policy gains of the Nigerian State (Financial Action Task Force, 2025). However, these developments do not erase corruption or violence, but they caution against treating *mankūs* as an irreversible national condition. Hence, the impact of al-ʿIlūrī's poem is more established when it directs attention to institutional tendencies: public office converted into private wealth, coercion substituted for law, and procedure emptied of its declared purpose. It becomes less useful when its moral absolutes are treated as a complete causal history. Nigeria's political strife also reflects federal tensions, regional inequality, struggles over oil, military intervention, religious conflict, and the strategic choices of political actors. Literary diagnosis sharpens the questions; it cannot replace historical explanation. Thus, al-ʿIlūrī's poem offers condemnation rather than a political programme. The Islamic tradition in which he wrote, however, supplies standards that answer its central charges.

a. Public Trust and Justice

The *Qurʾān* (the Islamic scripture) joins the discharge of trust to the just exercise of judgement:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ نِعِمَّا يَعِظُكُمْ بِهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا

God commands you to deliver trusts to those entitled to them and, when you judge between people, to judge with justice. Excellent indeed is what God instructs you to do. God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. (Qurʾān 4:58, author's translation).

The verse places public responsibility and fair judgement within the same moral command. Thus, public office cannot be treated as private possession because authority is held on behalf of those to whom the trust is due.

b. Embezzlement and Bribery

The *Qurʾān* condemns *ghulūl* (embezzlement of entrusted property), the dishonest appropriation of property entrusted to one's care:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَغُلَّ ۚ وَمَنْ يَغُلَّ يَأْتِ بِمَا غَلَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۚ ثُمَّ تُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

It is not possible for a prophet to act dishonestly concerning entrusted property. Whoever acts dishonestly

will bring what was misappropriated on the Day of Resurrection. Then every soul will be repaid in full for what it earned, and none will be wronged. (Qurʾān 3:161, author's translation).

A second passage addresses the use of wealth to corrupt judgement:

وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُمْ بَيْنَكُمْ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتُدُلُّوا بِهَا إِلَى الْحُكَّامِ لِيَأْكُلُوا فَرِيقًا مِّنْ أَمْوَالِ
النَّاسِ بِالْإِثْمِ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

Do not consume one another's wealth wrongfully, nor offer it to those who judge so that you may knowingly consume a portion of other people's wealth through sin. (Qurʾān 2:188, author's translation)

The Prophetic condemnation of bribery states the rule without qualification:

لَعَنَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ الرَّاشِيَّ وَالْمُرْتَشِيَّ

The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, cursed the person who gives a bribe and the person who accepts it. (*Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1337; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 3580, author's translation).

3. Consultation and Accountability

The *Qurʾān* describes consultation as part of the community's shared conduct:

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ
يُنْفِقُونَ

Those who respond to their Lord, establish prayer, conduct their affairs through mutual consultation, and spend from what We have provided for them.

(Qurʾān 42:38, author's translation).

The well-known hadith of the shepherd extends responsibility through every level of social authority:

كُلُّكُمْ رَاعٍ وَكُلُّكُمْ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، الْإِمَامُ رَاعٍ وَمَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، وَالرَّجُلُ
رَاعٍ فِي أَهْلِهِ وَهُوَ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، وَالْمَرْأَةُ رَاعِيَّةٌ فِي بَيْتِ زَوْجِهَا وَمَسْئُولَةٌ عَنْ
رَعِيَّتِهَا، وَالْخَادِمُ رَاعٍ فِي مَالِ سَيِّدِهِ وَمَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ، وَكُلُّكُمْ رَاعٍ وَمَسْئُولٌ عَنْ
رَعِيَّتِهِ

Every one of you is a shepherd and every one of you is answerable for those under his or her care. The leader is a shepherd and is answerable for the people under his care. A man is a shepherd within his household and is answerable for those under his care. A woman is a shepherd in her husband's house and is answerable for those under her care. A servant is a shepherd over his master's property and is answerable for what is under his care. Every one of you is a shepherd and every one of you is answerable for those under his or her care. (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 893; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1829a, author's translation).

Although the norms highlighted in the quotes above are not absent from Nigerian public life, Muslim scholars, organisations and political leaders have repeatedly appealed to *Shariʿah* (Islamic law), justice and moral government. The expansion of *Shariʿah* legislation in twelve northern states after 1999 was partly supported by hopes that Islamic law would curb corruption and improve social welfare. Research on its implementation, however, shows a gap between moral expectations and institutional performance. Political incentives, constitutional tension, selective enforcement, and administrative weakness shaped what reform achieved in practice (Weimann, 2010; Kendhammer, 2016, 2017). That experience answers the objection raised by the persistence of corruption in a society where *amānah*, *ʿadl* (justice) and *shūrā* (mutual consultation) are widely known but scarcely practised. *Amānah* requires transparent public accounts, conflict-of-interest rules, and consequences for diversion. *ʿAdl* requires courts and enforcement agencies that

apply law without favour. *Shūrā* requires more than consultation as ceremony; it depends on open participation, freedom to criticise, and institutions that can translate counsel into accountable decisions. Khan's account of Islamic good governance similarly treats ethical excellence as a public and institutional obligation, not a substitute for institutional design (Khan, 2019). Thus, the proposed corrective is therefore neither a sermon appended to political analysis nor a call to transfer informal religious authority directly into the state. It is an argument for joining moral language to enforceable procedure. The poem identifies what happens when politics acquires a corrupt lexicon. Reform requires a public lexicon in which trust, justice and consultation have observable institutional forms.

Conclusion

Al-ʿIlūrī's poem is a concise and challenging piece of political satire. Its strength lies in the careful choice of words. The poem depicts government as decaying, money as a foundation, law as something extracted, police as forces explaining the system, and political issues as associated with Iblīs. A rhyme based on the letter s unites these images, revealing a chaotic public sphere. When read in the context of Nigeria's post-independence political struggles, the poem offers a language to describe recurring failures without predicting specific events. Historical examples such as military coups, the annulment of the 1993 election, the diversion of public resources, electoral violence, and police misconduct support its imagery. The phrase *siyāsāt al-gharb* draws attention to the colonial origins of the institutions inherited at independence. Although the poem includes loanwords and relates to postcolonial theory, it does not exempt Nigerian actors from responsibility for how these institutions have been utilized. Its main contribution is emphasizing that political chaos is both moral and structural. Therefore, the appropriate response should connect ethical standards with institutional practices. Concepts such as *amānah* (trust), *ʿadl* (justice), and *shūrā* (consultation) become meaningful political alternatives only when public officials are held accountable, laws limit power, and citizens can participate freely. In this way, al-ʿIlūrī's satire advocates for reform rather than resignation.

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