Zamfara State
Ahmed Sani: “I am running for president”
The slogan, “Farming is our pride” is not just on billboards in different parts of Zamfara State, it is also on the lips of every citizen of the state. This is because since coming into office, Governor Alhaji Ahmed Sani (also known as Yerima Bakura) has purposefully pursued the policy of making agriculture the mainstay of the economy. Ben Asante and Andoor Iorhan report.

Governor Ahmed Sani’s desire to transform the state and position it as a leading agricultural region is based on nature’s endowment. The state has a vast area of arable land that, if properly harnessed, would not only supply a large proportion of Nigeria’s food requirements but also create employment and raise the living standards of the people.

Governor Sani is committed to making the slogan “agriculture is wealth” a reality. Since his election, he has tried to drum into the people the importance of agriculture with the catchphrase “Farming is our pride”. Yerima did not stop just at the slogan, but also created an agency, the Zamfara State Integrated Development Programme (ZASIDEP), to stimulate not only agriculture and the agro-allied sectors but other critical economic components. One of the roles of the agency is to develop targets and strategies in seven socio-economic areas – agriculture, small and medium scale enterprises, education, roads, health care, rural electrification and rural water supply.

This, it is hoped, will lay a sustainable development framework for the state with 2007 as the first milestone, and 2023 as the target date for attaining a prosperous state. But agriculture remains one of the top priorities of the agency.

In 2004, another agency was created, the Zamfara Comprehensive Agricultural Revolution Programme (ZACAREP) with the mandate of achieving the introduction of new farming techniques; the development and distribution of high yielding varieties and seedlings; the provision of dry season farming equipment and techniques; the construction and rehabilitation of earth dams and wells; and the provision of micro loans and agricultural support services to farmers.

Furthermore, ZACAREP will encourage the formation of farmers’ associations and cooperative societies. In particular, the governor charged ZACAREP to change the outdated farming practices in the state to modern mechanised farming methods. He backed up the charge with the provision of financial and logistical support. For instance, the agency got the governor’s agreement to employ 244 rural extension staff to strengthen its workforce.

The staff were properly remunerated and motivated with vehicles to ease transportation difficulties and enable them to effectively cover the entire state. The governor also negotiated the purchase of 300 farm tractors from an Indian company. The tractors were distributed to farmers on a loan purchase basis. Before the purchase of the tractors, ZACAREP had gone into partnership with agriculture and related research institutes across the country to acquire improved crop varieties and other farm inputs for farmers.

The agency also moved swiftly to loan farmers the means to drill 400 small-scale irrigation wells, in different parts of the state to enable them to undertake dry season farming. Today, Zamfara State has become the largest producer of food crops such as guinea corn, millet, maize, beans, rice and groundnuts in the country.

Over 16,000 farm associations and groups have been formed in order to access funds from the agency. Adequate farm inputs were sourced and distributed to 160,171 farmers in
2004 and 300,428 farmers in 2005 before the rains commenced. The agency also built up food reserves of over 400,000 metric tonnes this year.

With the realisation that adequate information remains the key to enlightening farmers on new farming techniques, the agency acquired modern communication equipment and computers to enhance its operations. With the aid of computers, the agency has built a data bank for all the farmers in the state.

To ensure that the farmers do not suffer any price glut in the market as a result of over production, particularly during the harvesting period, the Commodity Marketing Board has been empowered to buy such excess crops for storage. The crops purchased by the Marketing Board are used for the feeding of primary and secondary school students in the state.

The governor, in his determination to escape dependence on imported fertilisers, has taken a pragmatic step to reverse the situation. He upgraded the State Fertiliser Blending plant to operate at full capacity. In addition, he built massive silos in strategic locations across the state for the storage of grains.

Although, the agricultural revolution is still in its infancy, the people of the state have already started reaping the rewards. First, there is a reversal of the rural-urban drift with a trend towards urban-rural migration. This is because the youth have realised the financial gains in farming rather than seeking menial work in urban areas. Second, their quality of life has improved as illusion and despair has given way to a sense of fulfilment since becoming committed to farming.

Governor Sani has assured farmers that they will have access to fertilisers, tractors and whatever they need before the rains. “All these things will be in their houses before the rain set in,” the governor told New African. “We are also giving them interest-free loans and other packages including improved seed varieties. It will cover more than 80% of our farming.”

Over the last few years, production of maize has increased from 1.2 tonnes per hectare to between 4 and 8.7 tonnes per hectare because of the new farming techniques introduced by the state government. Alhaji Umaru Mohammed, 54, who spoke on the efforts of the government to improve agriculture, explained that the governor had taken agriculture very seriously and that he personally goes out to supervise the farms of the farmers who have taken loans from the state government.

The governor also holds regular interactive sessions with farmers to further inspire them to achieve greater productivity. He tells them that the economic transformation of the state rests squarely on their shoulders and that the government was merely providing the necessary foundation for them to build on.

Apart from agriculture, the government has also paid attention to other critical sectors meant to uplift the standard of living. One such effort, is the creation of the Poverty Alleviation and Youth Empowerment Programme.

This is to stem unemployment and counter a rising crime wave. Under the programme, secondary school leavers enter tertiary institutions to be trained as artisans. The skills acquisition centre, located in Gusau, has 35 training departments in areas such as fitting, joinery and furniture, printing, vulcanising, tailoring, block molding, architectural drafting, welding, air conditioning, refrigeration repairs, borehole drilling and maintenance, etc. Trainees are provided with start-up loans – either in cash or kind – to start their own enterprises.

In addition, the Poverty Alleviation Programme offers loans to organised trade groups and associations who in turn transfer the loans to their members. Such trade groups include motorcycle merchants, textile workers, grain sellers and women’s groups.

The programme also acquires and distributes on a loan basis motorcycles, tricycles, mini buses, cars and taxi cabs to those interested in operating commercial vehicles. It is no longer a luxury for a farmer to own a vehicle, particularly pick-up vans, but a necessity to move their crops to market.

The impact of the state government’s agriculture and poverty alleviation policies have led to Zamfara’s economy becoming one of the fastest growing in the country.

Below: Zamfara State’s fertiliser programme has hugely improved agricultural yields in the state

Left: Water resources have been a boon to agriculture

All photos by Sunday Aghaeze
Ahmed Sani: “I am running for president”

Twice successfully elected governor, Ahmed Sani Yeriman Bakura of Zamfara State is prominent among Nigeria’s new generation of leaders. He is focused and determined, and possesses rare qualities including a style of governance devoid of arrogance. He also has the unusual reputation for implementing people-orientated policies.

He is seeking the nomination of the main opposition party, the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), to run for president. He enjoys a large following within his state and has gained nationwide recognition within a short time as governor of his young state. At the national convention of the ANPP last September, many supporters carried his posters calling for him to lead the party. In this interview with Ben Asante, Governor Sani speaks with passion on his agenda for a new Nigeria under a youthful and purposeful leader.

NA: We have seen in many cities and villages across Nigeria your campaign posters for the presidential race. How serious are you in wanting to be the next president?

Governor Ahmed Sani: Despite recent manipulation to amend the constitution, including the aborted attempt to elongate the tenure of President Obasanjo, I have always believed that there would be a vacancy for the office of president in 2007. I wrote an open letter to the president telling him that he should see wisdom by quitting. We did not want to see this country go the way of others with people taking to the streets to voice out their opposition to sit-tight leaders. We never wanted democracy to be derailed. We did not want Nigeria to show the world that it is unable to practise and live under democracy. President Obasanjo has to leave in 2007 for others like me to offer ourselves as a new crop of serious and youthful leadership, willing to work hard and to serve.

NA: The move to amend the constitution had the support of so many of your fellow state governors. Why didn’t you join them?

Sani: Amending the constitution is a routine process which ought to be an open process, not the manipulative way it was done. There was hardly any transparency. Many of the proponents, including state governors, have not been sincere. They kept hiding their desire for the incumbent to stand for a third term under the guise of constitutional amendments. The majority of Nigerians were vehemently opposed to this dubious process to amend the constitution, because of the selfish desire for a third term for individuals who had been sneaked into the process. Many governors are afraid of what they have done in office over the past years, not being transparent, amassing wealth, not being accountable to their people.

NA: What other reason do you have for opposing a third term for President Obasanjo?

Sani: President Obasanjo, having served for this length of time, has achieved as much as is humanly possible within the time constitutionally agreed before now, and for him at his present age it is only normal that he should begin to slow down in many ways, including his organisational abilities. The trend in leadership elsewhere in the world is that people who are 40 and above should be given the chance, and those who are 70 and above should leave the stage.

NA: It may be your stand that younger people should be in Nigeria’s leadership race, but what concrete policies are you running on?

Sani: I am running because I strongly
believe that I have something to contribute to the development of this nation: the welfare and the well-being of the people, their security, economic development, their prosperity, the unity of the people, discipline and accountability, and to make poverty alleviation a reality.

Empowerment of the people and income generation as well as infrastructure development, are all things that the new leadership of this country in 2007 must tackle. I have been there; I have served as a governor for two terms: I have served on several national forums, including the National Economic Council, and I know the problems and I believe I have the solutions.

I know many of the problems, including insecurity and the threats to life and property. What is the cause of unemployment and armed robbery? We need to address the problems of the great majority of our people so as to end frustration. Once we protect life and property under the law and ensure due process, what we would have here is an investor’s heaven. I will make every sector of this country work, the civil service and the security sector included.

NA: As state governor, what concrete achievements are there to show that as president you will be able to solve Nigeria’s problems? Are the people of Zamfara better off today than when you were first elected?

Sani: I believe the people will make better judges of what we have been able to do here. But from the little impression I have seen on their faces and based on their reactions, I believe that this government has gone a long way in improving their lives. Just recently we launched the agriculture programme for this year and, as is always our practice in this state, our farmers were given their inputs, including fertilisers and tractors, to ready themselves for the planting season even before the rains start.

We had earlier provided them with interest-free loans, improved seed varieties and so on. This programme, in fact, covered more than 80% of the farmers in the state. This is the kind of programme that would help to improve the productivity of our farmers and therefore help achieve greater yields and bring about an improvement in their lives.

Last year we recorded an improvement in maize yields, for example, from 1.2 tonnes per hectare to a new average of 6 tonnes per hectare. Our agricultural programme has helped to provide food security. These are fundamental needs. In addition, our social policies have made this state the most peaceful in the country, with no crime, no armed robbery and no violence.

The government of Zamfara has lived up to its primary responsibility of guaranteeing the security of life and property. Our policies have enhanced coexistence between various different religions, ethnic and cultural groups and many other sectors and interests within the state. Our policies, first and foremost, are people-orientated: we provide free primary education to all pupils, we pay teachers’ salaries on time and few states can match our record and commitment in this sector.

We have built roads, and brought electricity to hundreds of villages. But what most gladdens my heart, is the evidence that our people are happy with our policies: youth empowerment through various skills acquisition and employment, the provision of amenities and programmes that provide for human and social development.

As an economist, I know the needs of Nigeria well. We require an accurate appreciation of what needs to be done and a determined focus in implementing the most essential policies to move the country away from underdevelopment to accelerated development.

It requires the provisions of basic needs like food, health, education and shelter for the people, and the ability to run an economy that produces results through productivity. We have demonstrated our ability to achieve results as shown over the last few years in Zamfara, and I intend to pursue these policies of providing security and a conducive economic climate as president of this country.

NA: The geo-political axis of Sokoto, where

“Nigeria is a multi-religious society of Christians, Muslims and even those who do not believe in any religion. What this means is that religion should not divide us, but instead be a source of strength”
you come from, produced the former president, Alhaji Shehu Shagari in the Second Republic, and given the area’s historic and religious influence as a power base for a considerable period, are you in fact saying that in running for the ANPP presidential ticket, you represent a new generation in pursuit of power from the zone?

Sani: The election of President Shagari in 1979 was the decision of all Nigerians and the outcome of a democratic process. I am offering myself against others from various parts of this country for the 2007 presidential election, and Nigerians across the length and breadth of the nation will decide the best choice to lead this country. My ticket is one that is fresh, a generational change that has been tested.

NA: About seven years ago, you campaigned for the position of governor. You did not campaign on the platform of a religious party, yet not long after your election, you shocked Nigerians by becoming the first elected official in recent times to declare a Shari’ah state. This one act, more than anything, shot you into national and international prominence. This move was controversial, given the acceptance of the declaration by the Muslim faithful on one hand, and on the other the spreading of fear among non-Muslims. Has this action been a drawback or an advantage, now that you want to run for president of the multi-cultural and a multi-religious Nigerian nation?

Sani: Under a democracy, people should have their human rights respected, the right to their religious belief and practice, the right to life and to hold different views; and under Shari’ah in this state all these rights are respected. The introduction of Shari’ah here has been an advantage because before this time Nigerians had had a misconception and at times lived in fear of each other over religion. For example, when the matter of Shari’ah was raised during past constitutional conferences, Muslims and Christians were prepared to throw stones at each other.

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Here in Zamfara, we have shown in the past seven years that Muslims and Christians can live peacefully together in a Shari’ah state where Christians practice their faith and Muslims live their way of life according to the tenets of Shari’ah. The overwhelming majority of people here are Muslim and want Shari’ah, but the Shari’ah way of life and practice in no way impedes Christians from practising their religion. There is no religious intimidation.

NA: Do you appreciate the fact that fear, if not the perception of harsh, cruel and unusual punishment, is seen by some people as resulting from living under Shari’ah?

Sani: Under the Shari’ah legal system, there are different modes of punishment for various offences. There is punishment for theft as distinct from the abuse of trust by public officials. We had a case here when certain elected officials converted public property to private use, which amounted to an abuse of trust. Those concerned were properly investigated and suspended. This offence is different from theft. The media hardly took notice as they had expected these people to be amputated. Shari’ah in no way prescribes cruel or crude punishment for every crime. It is more about living a moral life in the fear of God. In terms of Islam, we consider the born-again Christian just the same as a Shari’ah-compliant Muslim, as such a person would not fornicate and would not steal.

NA: It’s true, but people are worried about religious extremism.

Sani: In Islam and Shari’ah, there is no acceptance of extremism. A good Muslim cannot be either an extremist or a fundamentalist.

NA: Do you expect some people to deny you their votes because you introduced Shari’ah in Zamfara State?

Sani: People vote according to programmes, and whereas some people would vote for you on the basis of your social programmes, others may in fact reject you on the basis of the same programmes.
is a Christian and a leading politician and public figure, and there are others of different faiths in our organisation. These people believe in my leadership and my aspirations for our country. If some Christians do not vote for me, there may be Muslims too who may equally not vote for me. They may choose to vote for someone like General Babangida or Buhari or Atiku. This is the reality of life and politics, and in the end the decision rests with God.

NA: What do you make of Nigeria, as far as religion is concerned, given all its complexities?

Sani: Nigeria is a multi-religious society of Christians, Muslims and even those who do not believe in any religion. What this means is that religion should not divide us, nor create problems for us, but instead be a source of strength.

NA: With President Obasanjo out of the way (because of the rejection of the third term proposal), the field is still crowded with candidates wanting to be president in 2007. How sure are you of winning your party’s nomination?

Sani: My destiny is not in my hands. I am campaigning, I am confident and I am working with people who believe in me, who believe that my leadership can make a difference. I am working to get the nomination by the help of God.

NA: You have a massive organisation with structures and publicity organs throughout the state as demonstrated by the huge presence of your supporters at the ANPP convention in Abuja last September, and the launching of your campaign organisation and office in the capital. This no doubt has entailed massive spending. Where is the money coming from?

Sani: After offering myself and launching my campaign, people – including some whom I don’t know in person – began making contributions. In Lagos State, for example, one person took it upon himself to finance billboards for the campaign. Others have made contributions in various forms simply because they believe in me and in the programmes I am offering. There are many people across this country who have the zeal and interest of the nation at heart and are therefore prepared to contribute in making sure that the right person gets elected as president.

NA: Is Nigeria capable of producing a truly elected democratic president, with all the demands that the presidency be rotated, power be shifted from South to North or South-South to the South-East?

Sani: All the talk of power shift, power spread, rotation etc, are all means of bargaining. They are at the same time attempts to seek equity and to broaden appeal. These are arrangements limited to political parties. The constitution is very clear: the electorate, acting in a single constituency which is Nigeria, will elect the president as they have done in the past. The parties, by juggling, seek only to make their candidate attractive. The constitution does not recognise any other arrangement apart from people standing elections on party basis.

NA: Nigeria, compared to at least one regional power, is said not to have met its capacities due to an inability to generate enough electricity. It has also inadequate infrastructure, high unemployment, collapse of the educational system, and so on. Are you prepared to tackle all these problems?

Sani: My campaign is driven by a nine-point agenda, all well thought out and fashioned to solve this country’s problems. Top of the agenda is peace and security. There is no peace without security, social justice and equity.

My agenda for the new Nigeria calls for the full and equal development of everybody and emphasises gender equality and investment in the youth. The people of the Niger Delta, for example, feel marginalised and demand justice. The Nigerian state must invest in infrastructure and human resource development for the Delta’s peoples, provide amenities to meet the special needs of the inhospitable swamps and wetlands which is the source of the oil and gas.

No single part of this country should feel excluded. We need cohesion, which is essential for our national unity and a stable nation able to fulfil its full potentials. This nation must give to each and every citizen the opportunity for a meaningful life.

NA: Can you provide Nigeria with the leadership it so crucially needs?

Sani: I can provide leadership and lead a new crop of fellow countrymen and women to change this country’s direction to meet present and future challenges. This new crop of leaders can make Nigeria a leading country, second to none within Africa and a key player in the world.
Governor Alhaji Ahmed Sani is debunking the myth of inaccessibility associated with high office. *Andoon Iorhen* reports.

The governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Ahmed Sani, who holds the title of Yerima Bakura has effectively broken the “myth” of arrogance, insensitivity and inaccessibility in his leadership by not playing the role of a demi-god. Yerima, as he is popularly known, is one governor who remains accessible to the public. His simplicity, humility and unassuming character make him a true “man of the people”.

Despite the heavy demands of his office and the endless stream of people who seek meetings with him every day, he remains calm and unflustered. His door is always open. With a warm smile, he welcomes all, listens to their concerns, and does what he can to help.

Known as a man with quite an extraordinary power of memory and keen intellect, he recalls every discussion in minute detail and wastes no time in taking action on matters that require his attention. His openness with all people is almost infectious, as his aides and security details also show every respect and understanding towards the hundreds of people who come to see him.

Yerima’s modest style extends to how he conducts official duties. While some governors, for example, insist they must travel in official limousines, emblazoned with flags and insignia, Yerima’s style is distinctly different. He gets into any available car and off he goes.

A man of the people, he often defies the advice of his security people and jumps into the front seat of any car to attend state functions.

We arrived in Gusau, the Zamfara State capital, to interview the governor. As we approached his office, a few cars sped past us in a convoy. It was the governor returning from a state function marking the official start of the state’s planting season, at which subsidised farming implements and inputs were made available to local farmers.

At the gate of the governor’s private residence, we introduced ourselves and shortly after were ushered into the modest one-storey building that has been his home since his election as governor. He has pointedly refused to move to the sprawling official residence, the Governor’s Lodge.

An aide who ushered us into the sparsely furnished building, asked us to wait while he informed the governor of our presence. In a few minutes, we were led into the office. On the walls was lined with numerous awards made to the governor.

Yerima greeted us with a warm handshake and invited us to sit down. We had anticipated he would be tired from his official duties, but in fact that was not the case. As soon as the brief pleasantries were over, he asked: “Are you ready for the interview?” Throughout the 45 minute-interview, he calmly, and in good humour, answered all the questions put to him.

At the end of the interview, he asked his aides if people were waiting to see him. They said there were, and the governor requested they be shown in. After attentively listening to their requests and assuring them he would do what was possible, he invited us to join him for lunch. After lunch, we explained to the governor that we wanted to see some of the projects he had initiated. He challenged us to ask as many questions as possible at the project sites and requested that we come back to give him our feedback.

The following day, we completed inspecting the projects before returning to the governor’s office. After a short wait, we were shown into his office. Once again, his aides informed him that people were waiting outside to see him. Without asking who they were, he directed that they be ushered in. This left a lasting impression upon us, and as we drove out of Zamfara State, we talked at length about the governor’s open door policy.

A man of the people

Governor Ahmed Sani (right) is never far away from the people