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Prophets, Soothsayers, and the Nigerian Political Kingdom: A Study of the Prophetic Voices in the 2023 Presidential Election

Raphael Chijioke Njoku¹, Emmanuel N. Amadife²¹ Idaho State University, ² Kentucky State University

Keywords: Nigeria, politics, religion, clergy, prophetic politics, democratic elections, ethnicity, power

<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.143727>

Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy

The multifaceted relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria permits spiritual leaders to continue influencing the state. The idea of secular humanism that the holy and the material are incompatible has barely restrained the hold of faith in governmental affairs, moral suasion, and shared behaviors. While some observers denounce spiritual leaders for encroaching on the political sphere, others defend them as vital watchdogs of civil society and democracy. Examining how faith leaders engaged with the Nigerian political system during the run-up to the 2023 presidential election sheds light on how religion serves as a conduit for power struggles in a turbulent African democracy. Clerics used the pulpit to exert authority, denounce undesirable politicians, and lobby for votes for favored candidates, a practice that has become a putative component of Nigeria's electoral culture. This form of political and civil society engagement can foster conflict and entrench sectarian divisions, especially in multiethnic and multireligious societies where clerics with vested interests cloak themselves in the guise of religion.

Introduction

Prophetic politics, a phenomenon that has traversed the annals of human history, has recently garnered significant attention in the field of political studies. Hanska (2009, 93), an eminent authority in this field, has observed that it involves politicians who deploy religious, mythical, and otherwise culturally dominant narratives or other supernatural means to seek sociopolitical change conveyed in spiritual language. This brand of politics has gained prominence primarily during periods of profound political upheaval, a recurring theme in Nigerian politics since the country's independence in 1960. Nigerian religious clerics often exploit moments of sociopolitical decay to project authority and recognition. They legitimize their posture by claiming authority from a higher spiritual power—real or imagined—to interpret society's perceived injustices and corruption, thereby gaining admiration from their followers but displeasure from their opponents in government.

Despite the image of moral watchdog that religious leaders portray, the Nigerian political arena is characterized by the rule of self-interest, where individuals and groups (including the religious) compete for political authority to gain access to the spoils of office. The political prophecies

of clerics during the 2023 presidential election were not primarily driven by clerics' concerns for ordinary Nigerians suffering from dire economic hardship. Instead, they continued a long history of power struggles and the pursuit of influence under the guise of piety. These Christian ministers' utterances were motivated by personal interests aligned with Peter Obi's presidency rather than any coherent evidence of divine order. This manifest misuse of sacred authority underscores the urgent need for a robust discourse on the role of religion in a democratic system and the imperative to empower individuals and civil society with the consciousness to take a stand and effect fundamental change.

Religion and the Political Kingdom

Some societies have sought to separate church and state. Others have embraced the concept of “the sacred and the profane” despite its accentuation of tensions (Eliade 1959, 9). Religion and politics are so deeply interwoven that systems of religious belief have shaped political attitudes and behaviors in many countries, which historically has afforded Machiavellian leaders a sense of legitimacy. The nature and degree of religious influence vary depending on the type of political system, whether it is a theocracy, dictatorship, democracy, or other system. The diversity of choices, the nature of political power, and social structures shape the clerics' experiences and discourses.

In Western democracies, it is evident that state elites have not fully detached religion from their political systems despite the concerns by liberal-oriented scholars that faith-based groups have too much power over politics and that this can undermine liberal values such as free speech, pluralism, and tolerance (Spinner-Halev 2005; Audi 2020). In his cross-national study of religion and politics in Spain, Poland, and Brazil, José Casanova (1994) has noted that religious groups have a legitimate role in the public sphere and that policymakers cannot ignore their views. Casanova's study is important because it highlights the resilience of faith in the democratic orders of the West, where Christianity has shaped time-honored values and inspired political parties such as the Christian Democrats in Germany, the Conservative Party in Great Britain, and the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) in the Netherlands. The Church of England collaborates intimately with the monarch as the Supreme Governor of the United Kingdom (Williamson 2020, 57–79). Other scholars have observed that religion is a *force majeure* in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes in the United States (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). American evangelical Christians have been an essential constituency for conservative politicians, particularly on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Reflecting on the strong influence of religion in Western Europe's political order, Weber (1952) and Schneidau (1976) likened Jewish and Christian clerics to enchanting political pamphleteers and moral anarchists who indulge in a tradition of radical politicking and dissent.

Indeed, the individual destiny of these religious leaders is closely tied to the fate of their adherents, whose electoral behaviors they strive to influence (Buber [1949] 2016, 3).

In dictatorships, religion's influence has ebbed and flowed, as it can enhance legitimacy and social control and suppress opposition where it is tolerated. Dictators, as seen in North Korea, Russia, and China, may stop or persecute religious groups if they are considered a threat to the regime. When expedient, dictatorships may co-opt religious elites to support their policies and to provide moral justification for unpopular and cruel actions. For example, the patriarchs of the Orthodox Christian Churches have voiced support for Vladimir Putin in Russia and Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus. His Holiness Kirill of Moscow remains an ally of Putin despite Russia's unjust war against Ukraine. Lukashenko promotes Orthodoxy as a state ideology to maintain legitimacy and power in Belarus (Gudziak 2023; Kraliuk and Plyska 2020).

In theocracies, the firm privilege of religion is an instrument of legitimacy and a *raison d'être* for leaders, as seen in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Islamic states (Tamadonfar 2001; Ganji 2008, 64–66). Islam plays a central role in the legal system in these Muslim societies and is used to justify governmental decisions and policies. In Iran, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei holds authority as the country's Supreme Leader, combining spiritual and political leadership. Although Iranians go to the polls to elect their president, the Ayatollah solely approves the candidates for elected positions, and politicians must follow his directions or risk their lives (Chehabi 2001; Kashefi 2013).

In Africa, where the relationship between religion and politics is more complex and multifaceted due to the continent's indigenous practices and the impositions of Arab and European colonialism, faith has shaped and continues to influence political traditions, actions, and outcomes (Mazrui 1986; Vaughan 2016). As it has in other parts of the world, religion has served in African politics as a commanding force for positive change, but it has also served to justify violence, oppression, discrimination, corruption, and developmental reversals. There are tensions and conflicts within and between religious groups, and not all religious leaders and organizations are politically vigorous or influential. The degree to which religion influences politics on the continent is determined by social, cultural, and historical factors and varies widely across different countries, regions, and contexts. Highlighting a few examples of these sociocultural and political spaces is fundamental to this study.

South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) has close ties to local Christian denominations, including the Zion Christian Church, the South African Council of Churches, the Rhema Bible Church, and the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Many religious leaders played a crucial role in the

anti-apartheid struggle and contributed to the post-apartheid nation-building process (Kuperus 2011; Vorster 2017; Duncan 2022). In Zimbabwe, as in South Africa, the privileged religious elite, such as televangelist Emmanuel Makandiwa, reserve the right to reproach political leaders when they consider them to be undermining the state or inciting trouble (Manyonganise 2022). In Uganda, the influence of the Pentecostal movement has grown significantly in recent years, with many politicians seeking the support of influential pastors for political benefit (Bruner 2019). The Uganda case is particularly significant because it remains one of the rare instances in Africa where a major extremist rebellion has persisted under the banner of Christianity. Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has waged a relentless war of attrition against the people and government of Uganda since 1986 (Atkinson 2009; Dunn 2004).

Prophetic Politics in Nigeria

The Nigerian experience is not unique among these examples from the broader African, Asian, and Western worlds, but it offers a fascinating case study of the connection between history, religion, and politics in light of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996). Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Huntington concluded that future conflicts would be based on people's religious and cultural identities. Nigeria's pronounced religio-cultural divide, consisting of a dominant Muslim north versus a dominant Christian south, ensures that the conflict dynamics predicted by Huntington are fulfilled in the Nigerian context. Religion influences Nigerian society, and many people rely on spiritual leaders for guidance on various issues, including politics, health and wellness, economic breakthroughs, and even social relationships such as marriage. Politicians visit religious leaders to build relationships with them and to demonstrate their commitment to addressing the concerns of the leaders' communities. Places of worship provide significant platforms for political campaigns, particularly during elections. Candidates can use these forums to reach a broad audience and to communicate their policies and ideas to voters.

Religious organizations are ordinarily seen as essential actors in civil society, working to promote social justice and human rights. Numerous religious groups are engaged in humanitarian and development work, often serving as a voice for marginalized communities (Khafagy 2020). The Nigerian clerics are widely acknowledged as generous providers of humanitarian aid and as social organizers in a social milieu where dire economic conditions have led a significant majority of the populace to despair. However, as revealed in the 2023 presidential election, the clerics' political exploits, which leverage their connections with the masses, are becoming more aggressive and fearless. Two reasons may explain the elevated influence these men and women of God wield. Unlike in German and Belgian societies, where pastors receive salaries from the state, Nigerian church leaders are self-supporting. They

operate under the old aphorism that those who preach the Scriptures must live by them. Because of their independent income sources, most Nigerian pastors are not accountable to the government. Instead, they vie for power and political control with the politicians through prophetic pronouncements and other spiritual means.

The more pervasive and sordid reason why religion and clerics wield extensive power in Nigerian politics resides in the structure of society and the archaeology of power politics. Nigerian politics is deeply rooted in and infused with spiritual powers. The spiritual kingdom in Nigeria is extensive and diverse. Despite little or no Western-style education, self-proclaimed prophets, pastors, imams, and soothsayers have significant control over politicians. Elected leaders and political “godfathers” heavily depend on the spiritual protection that the religious class offers them. Outside the well-known bishops, priests, pastors, imams, and other prayer warriors and spiritual marketers, Nigerian society is saturated with the occult kingdom, juju priests, native doctors, magicians, secret societies associated with water deities (such as Mami Wata cults), and the like. The point is that since these religious practitioners offer immediate solutions to a wide variety of human challenges, the intermediaries of Christianity and Islam (e.g., priests, pastors, and imams) have only two alternatives to remain relevant in society: perform miracles of prosperity and healing like the intermediaries of the traditional occult religious systems do or ally with them. In this context, the political elite cannot operate freely without patronizing the prophets. In other words, ecclesiastical leaders in Nigeria maintain substantial influence and power over the political elite. This highlights the need to carefully balance the impact of religion and secular values in the complex political sphere.

A Continuing Complex and Combustible History

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has been plagued by a complex power struggle within a client-patron political framework. Although the constitution allows for freedom of worship, Christianity and Islam hold a commanding place in the daily lives of citizens through politics (Vaughan 2016, 13–20). Like their African neighbors, most Nigerians are religious, but the indigenous religious belief systems, in which most citizens participate clandestinely, are more alluring than the imported religions of Islam and Christianity. Spiritual leaders often utilize religious dogma to mobilize their followers to participate in politics and influence policymaking, particularly in matters of state and economics (Njoku 2006, 17–45).

Control of federal power translates to managing the available meager resources for the victor and his cronies in a sociopolitical milieu variously described by René Lemarchand as the practice of “clientelism,” by Richard Joseph and Peter Lewis as “Prebendalism,” and by Isaac Albert as “godfatherism” (Lemarchand 1972; Joseph 1987; Lewis 1996; Albert 2005). Nigerian clerics leverage their influence by manipulating the dominant creeds,

claiming prophetic visions, utilizing spiritual symbolism, accumulating wealth, and boldly endorsing their favored candidates in the electoral process. In other words, Nigerian clerics are as politically engaged as traditional politicians, civilians, military officers, intellectuals, and business leaders.

The conservative, powerful Sardauna of Sokoto, Alhaji (Sir) Ahmadu Bello, who led the Northern People's Congress (NPC) to independence in 1960, embodied the early postcolonial/modernist clientelist culture of spiritual-laden power and authority figures. On the eve of independence, Bello declined the gift of privilege that the departing British colonists offered, namely, to serve as Nigeria's first prime minister, because he preferred to be seen as the kingmaker in his position as the sultan of the defunct Sokoto Caliphate. Bello handpicked his deputy, Alhaji (Sir) Tafawa Balewa, who was appointed (without election) Nigeria's first prime minister on October 1, 1960 ("Nigeria Independence Bill" 1960; Robertson 1957). As the ultimate Muslim chieftain, Bello ensured that he influenced central government policies through Balewa and northern interests through the tenets of religion (Klieman 2012).

The order of clientship and religious influence enthroned by Bello endured and became entrenched under the subsequent governments, including military dictatorships. When a group of Nigerian army officers led a bloody coup that ended Nigeria's First Republic on January 15, 1966, religious identities played a vital role in the failure of the rebellion its leaders had projected as a revolution ("Federal Republic of Nigeria Paper" 1968; Omenka 2010). By crook or design, when the details of the coup and its execution emerged, some prominent Hausa-Fulani oligarchs, such as Bello and Balewa, were among the fatalities. The killings were not well received by many northern Muslim officers in the Nigerian army who may have supported the coup earlier. The response was a counter-coup led by Colonel Murtala Mohammed and Brigadier Theophilus Danjuma. While Mohammed may have been motivated by his strict Islamic religious convictions, the co-conspirators in the putsch, including Danjuma, a self-identified Christian, were not inspired by any act of faith. They were driven by the quest for political power, wealth accumulation, and influence that connects politicians, military officers, imams, clerics, and pastors in a multifaceted network of relationships in the Nigerian system. To diffuse the rising interreligious complexion of the counter-coup, the leaders ultimately turned the helm of power over to Major General Jeremiah Yakubu Gowon, who wisely dropped his Christian name, Jeremiah, to avoid an unpleasant interreligious backlash (Aluko 1977).

Religion has determined the course of more parochial and violent movements predicated on sectarian and radical Islamic fundamentalism. In 1982, Mohammed (Maitatsine) Marwa, a self-proclaimed Islamic purist, ordered his followers in the northern Nigerian cities of Gombe and Maiduguri to

attack fellow Muslims because their worship style did not comply with his strict practices and teachings. While the uprising, which eminent Africanist Elizabeth Isichei (1987, 201) branded as “a revolt of the disinherited,” was stirred by the rise of the pan-Islamic preaching of Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi and Iran’s Shia Islamic revolutionary rhetoric, the local leaders in Maiduguri blamed the uprising on “stresses placed by the Muslim community in Northern Nigeria, which is concerned about the dilution of its Islamic culture as Nigeria uses oil wealth to become a more urban, industrial and secular nation” (Dash 1982).

Although the government, led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari, halted the Maitatsine violent march for purity, the episode left a lasting impact on Nigeria’s future in two fundamental ways. First, the Maitatsine riots became the final incident in a series of problems, including widespread corruption, indiscipline, and civil disorder, that plagued the Second Republic. In the late hours of December 31, 1982, a group of Muslim officers led by Brigadier Badamosi Babangida seized the helm of government in a coup that brought Major General Muhammadu Buhari to power on January 1, 1983. The second consequence of the Maitatsine riots was that they laid the roots of the Boko Haram movement, which began in 2009 when Mohammed Yusuf, a Shia Muslim, launched a campaign to stop Western-style education and pave the way for an Islamic theocracy (Falode 2016).

While followers of other religious faiths also have vied for political influence and power in Nigeria, the course of violence inspired by the adherents of Islam, especially the Maitatsine sect, which later morphed into the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency, has led Nigerian Christians to seek ways to counter the Muslim privileges in the country’s sociopolitical landscape. Over the past two decades, the Christian elite in Orthodox and Pentecostal churches have gained a prominent voice through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and other social media platforms, contributing to the exponential growth and spread of televangelism and Christian power advocacy in the country.

The Christian leaders, mainly from the south, were determined to influence the outcome of the 2023 presidential election for their personal interests. They appealed to religious sentiments to sway voters into electing their preferred candidate, Peter Obi, a self-identified Christian and the presidential flagbearer of the Labour Party (LP), who emerged as the leading party candidate in the complex electoral struggle. To properly understand the dynamics that led Obi’s LP to become the staple of southern religious leaders, it is critical to briefly revisit how the three major parties in the 2023 presidential election selected their candidates. This will be followed by an examination of the specific political actions that church leaders undertook under the guise of prophecy and social activism.

Peter Obi and the 2023 Politico-Religious Theater

The All Progressives Congress (APC) was the party to beat in the 2023 presidential election because it was the ruling party. Second in terms of popularity and existing structure was the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which lost power to the APC in the 2015 presidential election, which brought retired general Buhari back to power. The LP only became a contender a few months before the election when Obi appeared as the presidential candidate. Until May 2022, Obi was a member of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), on whose platform he won the governorship election of Anambra State in 2010. Obi joined the LP when he failed variously to secure the tickets of the APGA and the PDP for the 2023 election (Adeneken 2022; Raji 2022; Oyero 2022).

Obi's advent and unforeseen rise to popularity were the result of time, youth appeal, unprecedented national economic failures, complex political maneuvering, and happenstance. According to the LP's governorship aspirant for Oyo State, Tawfiq Akinwale, the APC's candidate, Chief Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a master strategist, bankrolled Peter Obi's campaign to diminish the winning chances of his primary rival, Alhaji Atiku, the PDP's candidate (*Sahara Reporters* 2023). Atiku, a Hausa-Fulani, was arguably the most experienced of the three major candidates due to his previous experience as Nigeria's vice president under President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration (1999–2007). Atiku's presidential ambition was initially considered the primary threat to Tinubu, as the latter was presumed to be unpopular outside Lagos, his home state. However, Obi, an Igbo Christian, emerged as a strong challenger to the presidency when Tinubu, a Yoruba Muslim, selected Shettima Kashim, a Hausa-Fulani Muslim, as his vice-presidential candidate. Nigeria's dominant Christian southern population viewed APC's Muslim/Muslim ticket as an affront to diversity and a grave threat to freedom of worship. The sense of danger for the Christians was heightened in a country where most Muslim leaders had previously insisted that Nigeria should be declared an Islamic state and be ruled by Sharia law (Kendhammer 2013). The Muslim identity of the PDP's candidate, Atiku, left the Christian religious clerics in a state of hysteria. With few options to make their concerns count in the election, the Christian leaders looked to Obi for political salvation.

As the Christian clerics worried about their future welfare in a country under Muslim domination, it was a priority for the Pentecostal community to see that Tinubu's wild political gambling must fail after he ignored all advice to the contrary. The ethnocentric and adamant manner in which outgoing President Buhari, a northern Muslim, had conducted the affairs of the country in the preceding eight years gave the political atmosphere a spiritual aura. Buhari, an apologist for Muslim supremacy in the Nigerian political setting, often stoked religious sentiments by appointing majority Muslim candidates to his executive offices, military command positions, government

industries, and parastatals. In a virtual testimony before American lawmakers on July 18, 2021, for instance, Matthew Hassan Kukah, a bishop and radical social critic, accused Buhari of being “nepotistic in key appointments and favoring Muslims over Christians” (Fadare 2021).

Bishop Kukah’s sentiment mirrors a common fear shared by Nigerians—Christians and Muslims alike. Under Buhari’s stewardship, the Boko Haram insurgency became deadlier, and armed Fulani herdsmen with AK-47 rifles openly attacked predominantly Christian villages in the middle eastern and several southeastern parts of the country with impunity. Sometimes these attacks, unchallenged by state security agencies, left hundreds of people dead. In his testimony before the US lawmakers, Kukah recounted that Nigerians have “witnessed things we never dreamt about before—that is, the mindless targeting, slaughtering and kidnapping of church personnel in 2018, and for example—and this is not the first—I’m [*sic*] two of our priests and 17 of their parishioners were slaughtered during the morning mass and, you know, a lot of the killings, there’s absolutely no relationship between the atrocities themselves and the activities of ordinary people” (Fadare 2021 [punctuation added]; see also Opejobi 2021).

When the ominous picture depicted by Kukah is measured in light of the economic hardship under Buhari’s government, the incentive was high for the Nigerian Christian leaders to attempt to derail Tinubu’s presidential bid under a Muslim-Muslim ticket. Indeed, corruption and leadership dysfunctions have been common in Nigerian politics and society. Under President Buhari’s administration (2015–2023), the citizens experienced the worst deprivation and degradation since independence. This economic hardship was characterized by high unemployment rates, soaring inflation, and declining living standards. For instance, in 2015, the unemployment rate was 10.4 percent. This rose to 14.4 percent in 2016, 20.42 percent in 2017, and 23.1 percent in 2018. In the same period, inflation rates skyrocketed from 9.5 percent in 2015 to 18.5 percent in 2016. By 2022, the rate had risen to 21.8 percent (Ojo 2023). In February 2023, three months before Buhari’s second term as president ended, Transparency International reported that corruption remained a serious problem, with Nigeria ranked 150 out of 154 countries on the Corruption Power Index (CPI) (*Punch* 2023). This rampant corruption further exacerbated economic hardship, making it difficult for the average Nigerian citizen to afford basic necessities and maintain a decent standard of living.

The dire economic condition further reinforced the resolve of prominent Pentecostal churches, such as the Synagogue Church of All Nations, Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Gospel Pillars, and LoveWorld Incorporated—all of which had established a significant presence in the political kingdom through their humanitarian programs for their members, social criticism, educational scholarships, business support actions, and health-care assistance.

These organizations spearheaded the campaign to undermine the APC candidate and reshape the political equilibrium by leveraging the power of various social media platforms.

Prophetic Voices as Civil Society Power

The Christian churches' bold, if not provocative, actions in the 2023 presidential election underscore a power dynamic deeply ingrained in Nigerian politics. Politicians, in their pursuit of electoral victory, often court the blessings and endorsements of spiritual leaders. This interdependence enables the religious elite to exert their influence, shaping political agendas and even holding political leaders accountable for their promises, including provisions for adequate education, health care, and other essential services.

During the 2019 presidential election, the top two Muslim presidential candidates, Atiku (PDP) and Buhari (APC), made strategic moves to secure religious support. Both candidates chose Christian running mates, a decision that had its consequences. Several Christian pastors prophesied that Buhari (who chose Pastor Yemi Osinbajo as his vice president) would win a second term. This prophetic announcement aligned with some Muslim clerics who endorsed Buhari due to his purported commitment to combat corruption and enhance national security. On the other hand, his PDP challenger, Atiku, who chose Obi, a Christian, as his vice president, was backed by a coalition of five Christian groups. The coalition, led by the Christian Atikulated Network (CAN) and Christians in Power Network (CIPN), cited the need for change and believed that Atiku would provide better leadership for the country (Jannamike 2018). In response to these predictions, the two major candidates—Buhari and Atiku—took turns visiting various churches and mosques to seek the support of religious leaders and their followers. These strategic moves significantly influenced public opinion and voter behavior, ultimately shaping the election results in favor of Buhari (Ikem, Ogbonna, and Ogunnubi 2020).

While there had been antecedents of religious elites meddling in elections, the 2023 presidential election was at the threshold of an apocalyptic hysteria. A year before the 2023 election, a video surfaced on YouTube purporting to be a prophecy by Nigeria's most charismatic and controversial televangelist and philanthropist, Temitope Balogun (widely known as TB Joshua). The prophet declared that God would choose a man from among the Igbo to lead Nigeria to a new height (Joshua 2022). Joshua, the founder of the Church of God Synagogue, had died in 2021, and while the date on which he made the prophecy is unclear, its authenticity is not in doubt. The prediction influenced the broader national political discourse because the Igbo had been marginalized in the post-Biafran Nigerian civil war.

Other prophecies from pastors and seers appeared on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram as the election drew near. A video recorded in July 2017 by Prophet Isaiah Wealth, a Lagos-based Pentecostal televangelist, boldly foretold that “there will be a promised leader who will lead the nation” (Wealth [2017] 2023). Due to the political climate of the 2023 election, most of the audience who saw this video for the first time in 2023 assumed that the coming leader was Obi, an Igbo Christian from the southeast. In the controversial video, Wealth added that “before the elections, the hand of God will take one of the presidential frontrunners,” meaning that the sudden death of the candidate would clear the way for the Christian candidate. The Pillars International Church’s prophet later modified his predictions several times, including one in which he claimed it was “church leaders who chose the candidate,” Obi, and that Obi was not specifically his own choice nor was it accurate to interpret his initial prophecy as referring to Obi (Wealth 2022).

On February 19, 2023, several print media outlets carried news released by Primate Elijah Ayodele, the leader of INRI Evangelical Spiritual Church, declaring that God had sent him to tell Nigerians that the PDP’s flagbearer, Atiku, was the divine choice for Nigeria’s next president. In a memo released by Oluwatosin Osho, his media assistant, Ayodele claimed he was not predicting that Atiku would win. “It’s only the people’s vote that can determine that,” he said (Arogbonlo 2023). However, Ayodele insisted that God had chosen Atiku to restructure the political system, reform the education sector, reduce the price of petrol, and revive the economy—all of which were socioeconomic issues that the previous government had neglected. Bishop Ayodele added that Atiku’s mandate would last four years, but “if he wins and refuses to do the will of God for the people, he will see the wrath of God. He will not complete his term because God’s anger will be placed on him” (Arogbonlo 2023; Opejobi 2023; Ayodele 2023).

Some church leaders played it safe in their 2023 presidential election prophecies by avoiding a direct and clear pronouncement on potential winners. Pastor William Folorunsho Kumuyi, general superintendent and founder of Deeper Christian Life Ministry, was very cautious in his predictions. In a televised TVC News interview, Kumuyi declared that “God has determined Nigeria’s quest for the next president” to be for a “conscientious” leader. Although Kumuyi did not directly mention any candidates by name, Nigerian pastors and their congregants generally viewed Obi as a reliable choice. The candidates with Muslim affiliation, Tinubu and Atiku, were hardly considered conscientious by most Christian accounts (TVC News Nigeria 2022).

Pastor Joshua Iginla’s initial utterances on the election were marked by a similar voice of caution. In a video posted on YouTube on February 12, 2023, Iginla, founder of the Champions Royal Assembly, cautioned against statements and actions that would create unrest in the country. He

added that the outcome of the election, as revealed to him in a vision, “will shock every one of us” (Iginla 2023). About two months after the election, while judicial challenges against the election’s results lingered, Iginla, on May 21, declared that nothing would stop Tinubu’s inauguration. His declaration refuted several court challenges to Tinubu’s electoral victory, which his opponents considered rigged (Iginla 2023). Whether this was an opportunistic act intended to curry favor with the incoming president or not, it revealed who Iginla had in mind when he initially declared in February that the election results would shock many.

Perhaps the most daring prophetic exploit of the 2023 election period came from Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, President of LoveWorld Incorporated (also known as Christ Embassy). At a weekly worship service on Friday, February 17, 2023, Oyakhilome informed the congregants that an “Angel of God” had revealed to him the true character of the three leading presidential aspirants. During the service, the pastor took time to distinguish between the three candidates, claiming that the winner’s name is in the Bible, which means that Peter Obi (LP) was cruising to victory because Atiku Abubakar’s (PDP) and Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s (APC) names are not anywhere in the Christians’ holy books. Using the analogies of a “demon, a thief, and a saint,” Oyakhilome said that one of the candidates—obviously Tinubu—was under the influence of a demon named “Jackal,” who was represented as a “mocking entity, a swindler, and a trickster.” The second candidate, as described by the pastor, corresponded with Atiku and was portrayed as a thief who, if elected, would ruin the country. “In the spirit of the second candidate, if you let him get into office, you will have no country. You would have sold your country.” Regarding the third major candidate, Oyakhilome declared that although his name (Peter) is in the Bible, the candidate is afraid of winning, but he does not want to lose. “Then I prayed, Lord, give him wings to fly! His name is in the Bible.” Following this prophecy, Obi’s supporters erupted in joyous chants in Lagos and throughout the country, chanting “Kerelenke Obi!” (Oyakhilome 2023; Nseyen 2023; Emmanuel 2023).

Some Christian leaders publicly proclaimed that a third candidate would assume the seat of power after the 2023 presidential election. Although Buhari’s vice president, Yemi Osinbajo, was not on the election ballot, some religious clerics proclaimed he would be president. On January 17, 2022, Prophet Bisi Olujobi of Wisdom Church International, based in Ketu, Lagos, claimed that God had given him a fresh insight, indicating that Osinbajo would be appointed president in a transitional capacity due to election disputes that would lead to the cancellation of the 2023 election (Nwachukwu 2022). Echoing Olujobi, Prophet Godfrey Chidi, the convener of the Holy National Covenant of Divine Intervention in Nigeria’s Affairs, predicted in July 2022 that an interim government would be established in May 2023, when Buhari’s tenure expired. Another cleric, Gbujie, seconded both Olujobi and Chidi, stating that none of the three candidates would be

inaugurated as president. He declared that there would instead be an interim president because of the crisis that would follow the election (Tolu-Kolawole 2023).

On May 29, 2023, neither Obi, Atiku, nor an interim candidate was sworn in as president of Nigeria. Instead, Tinubu took over from his outgoing party leader and surrogate, Buhari. Reflecting on the amount and truth of the election's prophetic chatter, *Punch* newspaper decried what it saw as "hit-and-miss prophecies over Tinubu's inauguration" (Tolu-Kolawole 2023). Indeed, the election results and the sequence of events that followed until the new president's installation highlight more than the concerns of Nigerian clerics about the fate of their country, which has been mismanaged by generations of unscrupulous politicians since independence. The clerics' actions reveal their underlying concerns for power, survival, and patronage in Nigeria's client-patron relationship. Because they are used to wielding power and influence, the pastors, like their counterparts in Islam and traditional cults, feel entitled to share the spoils of political offices in Nigeria.

Apparently, God had hardly inspired the prophecies, as most never came true. In an interview with Toyin Falola in 2021, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah accused Nigerian politicians of engaging in spiritual activities, such as consulting diviners and performing rituals to win elections. Kukah noted that politicians do not believe they can win elections through hard work. Hence they resort to these spiritual activities. This recourse he attributed to a lack of "predictors," or professional election forecasting, as found in the US. The cleric asked his fellow religious leaders to resist any attempt by the politicians to compromise their faith. Bishop Kukah's call to action is a beacon of hope in a system that appears to be veering off course. The alliance between sacred shrines and predictions of electoral victory transcends electoral outcomes or the effectiveness of electoral laws. Kukah's take on the relationship between the pulpit and political power is interesting because he places the onus of this unholy relationship on the politicians. However, the bishop acknowledged that Nigerian society operates in a "dubiously spiritual" environment (Opejobi 2021).

The Nigerian sociopolitical and economic landscape is akin to a jungle where the rule of self-interest prevails. Despite the widespread economic hardships experienced by all Nigerians during Buhari's presidency, the allure of political parties, self-interest, and ethnic affiliations hindered a collective effort to prevent the ruling party, APC, from retaining power. The majority of Christian clerics' push for Obi's victory was stymied by ethnic bias and personal interests. This underscores the crucial role of civil networks in a political community and the urgent need for a robust discourse on social justice in a democratic system, which can empower individuals to take a stand and effect fundamental change.

Conclusion

There is no objective measure to determine who is right or wrong among the religious leaders who make prophetic predictions during elections. The projections are often based on personal interests, political subterfuge, and misinterpretations of divine guidance. In the context of Nigerian democracy, the influence of religious leaders on politics raises concerns about the separation of religion and state. This evokes Weber's (1952) allegory in which Jewish and Christian clerics are seen as entrancing political critics and moral anarchists who indulge in the habit of radical politicking and dissent. While religious clerics have the right to participate in the political process as citizens, their influence should not undermine democratic principles or infringe on the rights of others in free and fair elections. The Nigerian government and civil society must ensure that religious leaders respect the rule of law and the democratic process.

By seeking the support and endorsement of religious leaders, political candidates aim to garner the favor and trust of congregants, who may be more likely to vote for a particular candidate if their spiritual leader has endorsed him. Many religious institutions serve as community centers, offering social services such as education and health care, and thereby become an essential part of Nigerian society. Political candidates recognize the potential political capital of being seen as aligned with religious leaders, which can give them an advantage in the complex power dynamics of Nigerian politics.

Submitted: September 04, 2024 EDT. Accepted: July 24, 2025 EDT. Published: September 15, 2025 EDT.



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