



PROPHETIC RESPONSIBILITY AND POLITICAL NEUTRALITY: RETHINKING CLERICAL ENGAGEMENT AND ELECTORAL ENDORSEMENT IN NIGERIA

Godswill Ome Ufere

Independent Researcher, Biblical Studies & Public Theology

uferegodswillmatthias@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8063-8985>

Abstract

The intersection of religion and politics remains a significant feature of Nigeria's democratic experience, with Christian clergy increasingly participating in electoral discourse, political mobilisation, and, in some instances, the endorsement of political parties and candidates. While such engagement may be defended as an expression of prophetic responsibility and civic participation, it also raises important questions concerning the political neutrality of the Church, the authority of the pulpit and the ethical limits of clerical influence over congregational voting behaviour. This article examines clerical political engagement in Nigeria with particular attention to the distinction between legitimate political participation, prophetic critique and partisan electoral endorsement. Drawing on theological, ethical and socio-political perspectives, the study critically examines the use of sermons, ecclesiastical platforms, religious authority and congregational networks in electoral mobilisation. The article argues that political engagement by clergy cannot be treated as inherently incompatible with Christian ministry, since the Church possesses a legitimate prophetic responsibility to address questions of justice, governance, corruption, human dignity and the common good. However, the transformation of prophetic speech into partisan endorsement creates a more complex ethical problem because the pulpit carries a form of religious authority that can blur the distinction between theological conviction and political allegiance. The study therefore proposes a framework for distinguishing civic engagement from partisan mobilisation, and concludes that Nigerian churches can contribute meaningfully to democratic development without becoming instruments of electoral partisanship by prioritising political education, ethical discernment, prophetic accountability and respect for the freedom of individual voters.

Keywords: Church, political engagement, electoral endorsement, church neutrality, Nigerian elections

Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics remains one of the most persistent and contested dimensions of Nigeria's public life. Although Nigeria is constitutionally a secular state, religion continues to occupy an influential position in the social, moral and political consciousness of its citizens. Christianity and Islam function as major social institutions and their leaders command considerable authority within their communities. Political actors therefore routinely seek the endorsement of religious institutions, while religious leaders increasingly find themselves addressing questions of governance, accountability and electoral participation.



This relationship becomes especially visible during election periods, when political candidates visit churches and mosques, religious leaders comment publicly on political developments and congregations organise voter education programmes. None of this is inherently problematic: democratic societies depend on the participation of citizens in public affairs and religious communities are well placed to contribute to civic education. The difficulty arises when religious authority is converted into political authority.

The pulpit is not an ordinary political platform. A candidate addressing a rally appeals to citizens as voters; a cleric addressing a congregation speaks within a relationship shaped by religious trust and spiritual authority. When a political preference is expressed from the pulpit, it can therefore carry a persuasive force that exceeds ordinary political argument. This raises an important ethical question: should clergy remain silent about politics in order to preserve the Church's neutrality, or does Christian responsibility require them to speak on questions of justice, poverty, security and the common good? Neither extreme is adequate. Complete withdrawal from political questions would abandon the Church's prophetic responsibility, while using the pulpit to promote specific candidates risks turning the Church into a partisan institution and the congregation into an electoral constituency.

The central argument of this article is that clerical political engagement and partisan electoral endorsement should not be treated as synonymous. Clergy can participate in political discourse without turning the pulpit into a campaign platform; the Church can criticise government without endorsing an opposition party; it can educate voters without directing their votes; and it can advocate for electoral integrity without becoming an electoral machine.

This distinction has grown more urgent since the 2023 general elections and in the approach to 2027. Studies of the 2023 election show that religious leaders played an active role in political mobilisation, at times communicating explicit or implicit preferences for particular candidates and that religious and party politics jointly shaped voter choice in the presidential contest (Ajayi & Oyesomi, 2016; Joseph, 2026; Njoku & Amadife, 2025). The issue remains current. In July 2026, for instance, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) engaged President Bola Ahmed Tinubu on insecurity, poverty, education, democracy and the credibility of the 2027 elections (CBCN, 2026). The public exchange that followed, involving Cardinal John Onaiyekan, generated controversy over whether strong clerical criticism of government amounts to legitimate public advocacy or political intervention (Channels Television, 2026; TheCable, 2026). This episode is not the central focus of the article, but it usefully illustrates the continuing difficulty of distinguishing prophetic engagement from partisan politics. The problem is sharpened further by the Electoral Act 2026, which expressly prohibits campaigning on religious, tribal or sectional grounds for the purpose of promoting or opposing a party or candidate (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2026).

Against this background, the article addresses four questions: What theological and civic justification exists for clerical political engagement? Where should the boundary be drawn between prophetic political speech and partisan electoral endorsement? What does church neutrality mean within the Nigerian democratic context? And how can clergy participate constructively in political life without compromising congregants' freedom or the Church's public credibility? It argues that the appropriate position is neither political withdrawal nor partisan mobilisation but prophetic non-partisanship: active engagement with political questions while preserving institutional independence and the freedom of individual Christians to make their own electoral choices.



Religion and Politics in Nigeria

The involvement of religion in Nigerian politics is neither new nor exclusively Christian. Obadare (2018) documents the significance of Pentecostal and other religious actors in the political development of Nigeria's Fourth Republic and religion has historically interacted with political authority, social identity and contests over state power. The Nigerian context is complicated further because religion intersects with ethnicity and region: Eze et al. (2024) argue that the interaction of religion and ethnicity has entrenched forms of social and political segregation in Nigeria. Religious political mobilisation can therefore easily move beyond theological questions and become intertwined with contests over regional representation and access to power, which makes clerical intervention during elections particularly sensitive. A religious leader may believe that a given intervention merely defends Christian interests, yet when those interests are defined by the religious identity of candidates, the intervention can deepen existing divisions rather than resolve them.

The 2023 presidential election illustrates the problem clearly. The Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket of the All Progressives Congress (APC) generated intense religious debate, while the candidacy of Peter Obi attracted significant support among sections of the Christian population; research on the election has documented the use of religious identity and messaging by both political actors and religious leaders (Joseph, 2026; Njoku & Amadife, 2025). Religion thus became simultaneously a source of political mobilisation and a framework through which voters interpreted political choice. This raises a fundamental question for the Church: is the responsibility of Christian leaders to mobilise Christians as a religious voting bloc, or to form them as ethically responsible citizens? The distinction organises much of the analysis that follows.

Theological and Theoretical Framework

- ***The Prophetic Tradition***

The claim that clergy should abstain entirely from politics is difficult to sustain within the biblical prophetic tradition. The prophets of Israel repeatedly confronted political authority: Nathan confronted David over his abuse of power (2 Sam. 12:1–7); Elijah confronted Ahab over the seizure of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21); Amos condemned rulers and social structures that produced injustice (Amos 5:11–24); and John the Baptist challenged Herod's conduct (Mark 6:17–20). These examples establish that religious leadership carries a legitimate public dimension and that the Church cannot treat politics as wholly outside its theological responsibility, since political decisions bear directly on human life and dignity. Where governments fail to protect citizens from violence, where corruption impoverishes the vulnerable, where elections are manipulated, or where political power is used to suppress legitimate opposition, clergy have theological grounds to speak. The prophetic function of the Church is therefore not silence but moral independence.

- ***Jesus and Public Responsibility***

The ministry of Jesus similarly resists a purely private understanding of Christian faith. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, confronted religious and social injustice, defended marginalised persons and criticised structures that burdened ordinary people. His ministry cannot be reduced to electoral politics, but neither can its social implications be set aside: his declaration in Luke 4:18–19 concerning the poor, the captive and the oppressed establishes a theological basis for concern about social structures and his teaching on justice, truth and mercy carries implications for public life. Christian political engagement is therefore legitimate when it translates these moral commitments into public concern for justice; the difficulty begins when the Church moves from the ethical evaluation of politics to the sacralisation of political preference.



- ***Clergy as Citizens and as Religious Authorities***

A cleric holds at least two relevant identities in a democratic society. As a citizen, the cleric possesses political beliefs, voting rights and civic responsibilities like any other person; ordination does not extinguish this identity. As a religious authority, however, the cleric also exercises a form of institutional and spiritual power over a congregation. The ethical difficulty concerns the use of the second identity to impose the political preferences that properly belong to the first. A minister who votes for a given candidate in a private booth exercises an ordinary constitutional right; a minister who tells congregants that “true Christians must vote for” that candidate exercises religious authority in the service of electoral politics. The distinction should hold even where the minister sincerely believes the favoured candidate to be the better one, because what changes is not the sincerity of the belief but the instrument used to advance it.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, documentary and conceptual approach. It draws on scholarly literature in religion and politics, political theology, Christian ethics and Nigerian electoral studies, together with ecclesiastical statements, electoral legislation and selected reports of contemporary political and religious developments. The study does not attempt to measure statistically the influence of individual clergy on voting behaviour; rather, it examines the ethical and theological implications of clerical political engagement by analysing the relationship between religious authority, political communication and electoral choice. Particular attention is given to the 2023 general elections, which provide a recent and significant context in which religious identity, clerical authority and electoral politics intersected and to developments surrounding preparation for the 2027 elections where these illuminate the continuing relevance of the debate. The 2026 engagement between the CBCN and the Federal Government, including the subsequent public discussion involving Cardinal Onaiyekan, is used only as a contemporary illustration of the wider relationship between religious leadership and government accountability, not as the study’s central case.

The Pulpit, Political Education and Electoral Mobilisation

The pulpit possesses a distinct form of authority because it operates within a theological relationship. Congregants do not typically attend worship to hear political opinion; they attend to hear Scripture interpreted, to receive spiritual guidance and to participate in worship. When political claims are inserted into this setting, they can acquire theological weight that ordinary political argument does not carry: a political preference may be presented as a Christian duty, a candidate described as “God’s choice,” or an opponent portrayed as morally or spiritually dangerous. The effect is to convert political disagreement into religious disagreement, which can damage both democratic citizenship and Christian fellowship. Where a congregation contains members supporting different parties, a minister who insists that only one political choice is compatible with Christian faith turns political diversity into a test of religious loyalty, resulting to political coercion disguised as spiritual guidance. This is why the pulpit warrants greater ethical restraint than an ordinary political platform.

Political education is among the most constructive forms of clerical political engagement available to Nigerian churches. Congregations can be taught about voter registration, electoral procedure, the importance of participation, peaceful conduct, electoral malpractice, political accountability, candidate evaluation, constitutional rights, the rejection of vote-buying and issue-based politics. All of which strengthen rather than compromise democratic life. Political mobilisation is more complicated. Encouraging members to register and vote is a legitimate extension of this educational



role; organising them around a particular party or candidate is not. The ethical problem, in other words, lies not in mobilisation as such but in *partisan* mobilisation conducted through religious authority. Uwaegbute's (2025) study of churches in Nsukka during the 2023 election is instructive here: churches were found to participate actively in the electoral process through voter education and engagement with candidates, yet some moved beyond an ostensibly "apolitical" posture to subtly direct members toward particular political choices.

Electoral Endorsement and the Sacralization of Politics

Electoral endorsement becomes especially problematic when religious authority is used to legitimise particular candidates. During the 2023 election, more than one hundred clerics in Rivers State publicly declared support for Bola Tinubu and urged mobilisation for his candidacy, while other Christian leaders publicly supported Peter Obi and still others backed different candidates (Joseph, 2026). The existence of this disagreement among Christian leaders is itself significant: it demonstrates that there was no single "Christian candidate," and that a cleric's assertion that Christians should vote for a particular candidate because that candidate represents Christianity implicitly (and indefensibly) equates the cleric's personal political preference with the political obligation of all Christians. Christians can and evidently do, disagree politically while remaining Christians; the presence of that disagreement within the Church may in fact be healthier than the manufacture of a religiously uniform voting bloc.

The distinction between prophetic critique and partisan endorsement can be stated simply: prophetic critique asks whether political power is being exercised rightly, which is fundamentally an ethical question, whereas partisan endorsement asks which political actor should hold power, which is an electoral one. A minister who says that "government must protect citizens from insecurity," or that "government has failed to protect citizens from insecurity," remains within prophetic critique. A minister who urges citizens to vote for a candidate who demonstrates capacity on a given issue moves toward political advocacy but can still remain issue-based. A minister who declares that "Christians must vote for Candidate X because Candidate X is God's choice" has crossed into partisan religious mobilisation. The line is not always absolute, but it offers a workable ethical test.

This sacralization of political preference carries a further theological cost. When political choices are cast in explicitly religious terms, ordinary political disagreement becomes difficult to sustain: if a candidate is God's choice, opposing that candidate risks being read as opposing God; if a party is described as defending Christianity, criticising it risks being read as hostility to the faith itself. Political parties, however, are human institutions rather than churches; political leaders are not messiahs and political manifestos are not confessions of faith. The Christian Gospel cannot be reduced to the programme of any party and the Church loses something theologically essential whenever it confuses political allegiance with Christian discipleship.

A related threat to the credibility of clerical political engagement is selective prophecy, that is, vocal criticism of an opposing party in government paired with silence about identical conduct by a preferred party. Such selectivity undermines the prophetic character of the Church, whose voice must be able to criticise both allies and opponents: a leader who supported a government during an election should remain willing to criticise it when necessary, just as a leader who opposed an administration should be willing to acknowledge its genuine achievements. Maintaining this consistency is essential if the Church is to avoid becoming an ideological echo chamber rather than a moral witness.



Church Neutrality Reconsidered

Church neutrality is frequently invoked as though it required withdrawal from politics altogether, but this understanding is inadequate. If neutrality means refusing to name political injustice, it collapses into indifference; if it means refusing to endorse parties or candidates while remaining free to address political issues on their merits, it becomes a defensible institutional principle. The Church should therefore pursue non-partisan engagement rather than political disengagement: free to declare that corruption, vote-buying, electoral violence, intimidation and oppression are wrong and that poverty and insecurity demand attention, while applying these same moral standards to every political actor regardless of party.

This principle depends, in turn, on protecting the freedom of the individual Christian conscience. The Church's task is to form conscience, not to replace it: a minister's responsibility is to help congregants reason morally about political choices, not to eliminate their own responsibility for making those choices. This matters because political judgment is typically prudential rather than purely moral. Two Christians may agree that poverty is wrong while disagreeing about which economic policy addresses it most effectively; two may agree that insecurity must be addressed while disagreeing about strategy; two may agree that corruption is immoral while disagreeing about which candidate is best placed to confront it. Such disagreement does not indicate theological failure, it is part of ordinary democratic citizenship and the pulpit should cultivate political discernment rather than demand political obedience.

The relationship between clergy and political candidates requires similar ethical care. Politicians understandably seek access to religious communities because of their size and social influence, but churches must guard against this relationship becoming transactional, with the politician seeking religious legitimacy, the cleric seeking political access or patronage and the congregation ultimately serving as the instrument through which both interests are advanced. Churches are accordingly well advised to adopt transparent rules for engaging political candidates: where one candidate is granted access to a church platform, others should not be arbitrarily excluded and where political donations are accepted, clear policies should prevent them from being read as payment for endorsement. Preserving this institutional independence is a precondition for the credibility of everything argued above.

Contemporary Electoral Developments in Nigeria

The contemporary political environment demonstrates that this issue remains unresolved rather than merely historical. In July 2026, the CBCN met with President Tinubu and raised concerns about insecurity, poverty, education, democracy and the credibility of the forthcoming elections (CBCN, 2026). That engagement was not itself an electoral endorsement; rather, it illustrated how a religious institution can engage government on matters of legitimate public interest without backing a party or candidate. The subsequent public comments attributed to Cardinal John Onaiyekan generated debate over the proper limits of clerical criticism: some political actors read the comments as politically motivated, while others defended the Cardinal's right to raise concerns about poverty, corruption and governance (Channels Television, 2026; TheCable, 2026). The episode's importance lies less in its specifics than in the wider principle it illustrates – that criticism of government is not automatically endorsement of the opposition. If every criticism were treated as partisan opposition, religious leaders might grow reluctant to exercise legitimate prophetic responsibility; conversely, if every clerical political statement were excused as prophetic merely because a cleric delivered it, genuine partisan intervention could escape scrutiny altogether. The more appropriate test is the



substance, consistency and purpose of the intervention, applied evenly regardless of who currently holds power.

Nigeria's legal framework adds a further dimension to this debate. The Electoral Act 2026 expressly prohibits campaigning or broadcasting on religious, tribal, or sectional grounds for the purpose of promoting or opposing a party or candidate and provides criminal and financial penalties for violation (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2026). The provision recognises the danger of converting religious identity into an electoral weapon and its implication for churches is not that political education must be abandoned but that civic education must be clearly distinguished, in both substance and presentation, from partisan campaigning. A sermon encouraging peaceful voting is not equivalent to a sermon instructing members to vote for a particular party; a theological reflection on justice is not equivalent to electoral propaganda; a discussion of corruption is not equivalent to campaign mobilisation. Preserving these distinctions in practice and not merely in principle, is the central challenge facing Nigerian religious leaders as the country approaches 2027.

Toward a Framework of Prophetic Non-Partisanship

The preceding analysis supports a positive framework rather than only a set of prohibitions. This article proposes prophetic non-partisanship as a model for the proper role of clergy in Nigerian electoral politics, comprising five interlocking dimensions: moral engagement, institutional independence, electoral fairness, conscience protection and consistent accountability. Moral engagement requires clergy to speak on political issues bearing on justice, human dignity, peace, corruption, poverty and security. Institutional independence requires churches to avoid becoming organisational extensions of political parties. Electoral fairness requires that worship services and ecclesiastical authority not be used to promote particular candidates. Conscience protection requires that congregants retain the freedom to make their own electoral choices without being treated as spiritually disloyal for disagreeing with their minister. Consistent accountability requires clergy to hold political actors to the same moral standards regardless of party affiliation. Together, these dimensions avoid the false choice between silence and partisanship that has structured much of the debate to date.

This framework also positions the Church as a school of democratic citizenship rather than an electoral machine. Congregational networks are well suited to teaching members how elections work, why voting matters, how to evaluate candidates on policy and character, why vote-buying and political violence are incompatible with Christian ethics, why religious intolerance is dangerous, why political opponents remain fully human, why electoral losers should accept legitimate results and why governments must be held accountable beyond election day. Practically, this suggests several operating principles for Nigerian churches during electoral periods: keeping the pulpit primarily a space for worship and moral formation rather than a campaign platform; actively encouraging voter registration and participation; avoiding directives that link a particular vote to religious, denominational, or ethnic identity; applying the same standard of judgment to every party; encouraging issue-based rather than identity-based voting; protecting political diversity within the congregation as compatible with Christian fellowship; declining financial or institutional arrangements that would compromise the Church's capacity to criticise political authority; and consistently condemning political violence, hate speech, intimidation and electoral manipulation. None of this requires the Church to become apolitical; it requires the Church to become more ethically political and less electorally partisan.



The central issue in Nigerian clerical political engagement is not whether religion should be present in public life; it is already deeply embedded in Nigerian society and attempts to remove it entirely from political discourse are unrealistic. The more consequential question is whether religious authority will contribute to democratic development or to democratic manipulation. There is reason for cautious optimism, in that, churches possess networks capable of facilitating voter education and civic participation, religious leaders can encourage peaceful elections, challenge corruption, speak for vulnerable populations and demand electoral credibility. But the experience of the 2023 elections also demonstrates the risks documented throughout this article. Where clerical authority is used to direct voting behaviour, political choice can harden into religious obligation; where candidates are presented as representatives of a particular faith, elections risk becoming contests between religious communities; and where political prophecy substitutes for policy analysis, citizens may evaluate candidates by spiritual claims rather than competence and accountability. Recent scholarship has accordingly called for moderating church involvement in ways that do not undermine democratic choice (Okwuosa & Okoli, 2025; Uwaegbute, 2025). This does not mean churches should retreat from the public sphere, rather, it means they should enter it with moral independence rather than partisan ambition.

Conclusion

The relationship between the pulpit and the ballot box in Nigeria presents a genuine theological, ethical and democratic problem, but not an intractable one. Clergy cannot reasonably be expected to remain silent about political affairs, since political decisions shape the moral and material conditions of human life; questions of justice, corruption, insecurity, poverty, human dignity and electoral integrity are legitimate concerns of Christian ethics. Legitimate political engagement, however, does not require partisan electoral endorsement and the distinction between the two is essential to the Church's public credibility. The Church can speak about politics without becoming a political party; clergy can educate voters without controlling their votes; religious leaders can criticise government without automatically endorsing the opposition and churches can defend electoral integrity without becoming electoral machines.

The Electoral Act 2026 underscores the seriousness with which Nigerian law now treats the entanglement of religious and electoral mobilisation. The appropriate theological response to all of this is not political withdrawal but prophetic non-partisanship: a Church sufficiently engaged to challenge injustice and sufficiently independent to resist political capture. The pulpit should form conscience rather than replace it, helping the Christian voter ask the right questions rather than supplying a predetermined political answer. In a democracy, the Christian voter must ultimately enter the voting booth with a conscience that belongs neither to the pastor nor to the party, but to the voter before God. The strength of the Nigerian Church's political witness will therefore be measured not by how many votes a cleric can deliver to a candidate, but by whether the Church can form citizens capable of valuing justice, truth, accountability, peace and the common good.

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