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# Observing without reporting: critiquing the failure of election observers to report preemptive electoral prophecies in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Although Nigerian elections are sufficiently observed by domestic and international observer groups, the frequent pronouncements of religious leaders claiming to have supernatural insights into election outcomes have never captured the attention of these observers. This is despite the fact that election prophecy may have adverse effects on the electoral process and the survival of Nigeria's nascent democracy. This paper critiques the failure of election observers to capture this unfolding trend in their reports bearing in mind that pre-emptive electoral prophecies violate Section 95 (3) (b) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended). The tendency to question the integrity and neutrality of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the judiciary (in cases of post-election litigations), has worsened because of unguarded electoral prophetism. It is therefore recommended that election prophecy should be captured in official election reports so as to – at least – show its enormity. This may trigger a concerted effort among election stakeholders to control it.

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## Introduction

Despite the constitutionally entrenched secularism of Nigeria, religion has continued to play a vital role in the body politic as it has become a means to capture state power, and electoral mobilisation (Obianyo 2010; Ezeibe and Ikeanyibe 2017). Edewor (2008) rightly observes that religion influences the public polity by means of such spiritual tools as prophecy and prayers. Burgess (2015) opines that the rise of Nigerian Pentecostalism has significantly affected the political space. Obadare (2018, 1) argues that the advent of democracy in Nigeria coincided with the political triumph of Christianity over its historical rival, Islam, as a political force in Nigeria. This *triumph* is underpinned by its Pentecostal brand renowned for its claim to custodianship of political power (Ihejirika 2012). Certain Pentecostal leaders consider themselves kingmakers in Nigerian electoral politics (Ihejirika 2012). This underlies the frequent prophecies and *divine endorsements* of some candidates. The popular belief among

some Nigerian Pentecostals is that the ethical foundation of politics will be restored when God chooses leaders (Obadare 2018).

Prophecy is one of the means of supernatural communication (Nwolise 2015). It entails the supernatural ability of an individual to reveal the mind of God regarding events or people at a particular time. Prophecy as a means of political engagement by Christian leaders has always played a critical role in Nigeria's political trajectory, beginning from the military dictatorship of the 1980s to the late 1990s. During this period, a surge of neo-Pentecostal theology emerged, focusing on salvation with emphasis on freedom from all forms of social and spiritual oppression (Adeboye 2007). This new wave of teachings guaranteeing the people prosperity, healing, miracles and breakthroughs resonated because it coincided with the mélange of economic and political crises occasioned by widespread corruption, mounting national debt, and unemployment. Unfortunately, the military mainly relied on repressive measures to contain dissent by human rights and pro-democracy activists. In 1993, the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the widely acclaimed presidential election won by Chief M. K. O. Abiola. At this point, such Christian leaders as Bishop Alaba Job, Archbishop Anthony Okogie, Archbishop Sunday Mbang and Right Reverend Emmanuel Gbonigi, among others, began to actively speak on political issues in Nigeria (Obadare 2018). More importantly, a redemptive mode of political engagement through prophecy was used by Pentecostal leaders such as Pastor Tunde Bakare in demonising and delegitimising the regimes of Generals Buhari, Babangida and Abacha, respectively, while prophesying about an economically prosperous and politically stable Nigeria. Interestingly, the death of Abacha was ascribed to the prophecy given by both Pastor E. A. Adeboye and Pastor Tunde Bakare (Edewor 2008; The Whistler 2017). This may have given credibility and acceptance to the force of prophecy in Nigeria's public space.

The redemptive prophetic mode during the military era metamorphosed into *king-making* form at the return to democracy in 1999, and this manifests in how politicians scramble for endorsements of religious leaders (Ihejirika 2012). Moreover, the new democratic space precipitated the emergence of various subnational groups agitating for a place at the national level. According to Iyekekpolo (2020), the struggle for power at the centre among competing elites on the basis of identity dialectically motivated the formation of subnational militant groups in defence of their identities. This scenario combined with political prophetism portends danger to the electoral process (Sackey 2017). For instance, in 1999, former President Olusegun Obasanjo was declared the winner of the presidential race following the decision of Nigeria's politico-military oligarchs (mostly of Northern Nigerian extraction) to compensate the Yorubas (South West Nigeria) for the annulment of the 1993 presidential election won by M. K. O. Abiola. Thereafter, Pastor Tunde Bakare thundered with the following prophecy: 'Obasanjo is not your messiah. He is King Agag and the prophetic axe will fall upon his head before May 29' (cited in Ikem, Ogbonna, and Ogunnubi 2020, 39). This heightened the anxiety among Nigerians regarding a possible disruption of the transition to democratic rule. In particular, Obasanjo, fearing the possible fulfilment of the prophecy, quickly gathered several pastors to pray against the manifestation of the doomsday prophecy (Obadare 2018). Similarly, there were prophecies about the death of former President Musa Yar'Adua. The president, who was from North West Nigeria, had been sick, and as the North feared that he might die, there was a strong sentiment in the North against the transfer of power to Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan, who is from the South. It was at this time that the prophecies

were being released by pastors mostly from Southern Nigeria, thus worsening the already tense situation.

In 2015, there were prophecies released by some Christian leaders that the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, would defeat his main challenger, Muhammadu Buhari, in the 2015 presidential election. Consequently, Niger-Delta militants plugged into these prophecies and threatened that if Jonathan was not declared the winner, there would be war (Eziukwu 2015). It was the prompt concession of defeat by the former president that mitigated the crisis that would have engulfed the country (EU-EOM 2015). Prophecies and counter-prophecies also featured in the 2019 general elections. Regrettably, domestic and international election observer groups (EOGs) have often failed to recognise and report this trend despite its grave implications for national security and electoral integrity.

Since 1999, EOGs accredited by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have participated in the monitoring of elections. With their focus on ensuring the integrity of the electoral process, they have deployed human and material resources to monitor Nigerian elections. According to INEC, 130 domestic and 39 foreign observer groups were accredited for the 2019 general election (INEC 2020). The scope of their engagement covers the whole gamut of the electoral process, before, during and after the elections. It is based on their observations that they issue reports chronicling the election events, identifying shortfalls and making general recommendations for institutional reforms required for better, future elections. No doubt their recommendations have spurred some electoral reforms. Unfortunately, a thorough examination of these reports exposes their failure to capture an integral part of the electoral process – election prophecy. Election prophecies are pre-election declarations in the public sphere, pertaining to the outcome of national elections, by religious clerics who attribute their revelations to the will of God (Sackey 2017, 49). With the use of traditional and social media platforms, these prophecies are widely received, and arguably shape the voting choice of certain segments of Nigeria given their trust in their religious leaders (Ferrett 2005; Isah 2019). Interestingly, Berry (2020) submits that American voters are gradually heading in this direction because of the decline of *values voters*, and the rise of *prophecy voters*. Pew Research Centre's survey indicated that *prophecy voters* formed the core of Trump's evangelical base. A third of Americans see God's hand in presidential elections, with the majority of white evangelicals (56%) and black Protestants (48%) considering recent presidential elections to be part of God's plan for the winners (Smith 2020). Unfortunately, the election prophecies about the US 2020 presidential were directly linked to the Capitol Hill violence, and justified the claim of electoral fraud maintained by Donald Trump (Kestenbaum 2021). A pastor, Johnny Enlow, had maintained that more than 100 credible Christian prophets around the world had affirmed that Trump would win the election (Duin 2021).

In the case of Nigeria, prophetic declarations and their implications have not in any way attracted the attention of EOGs. Failure to report this phenomenon may not be a surprise because even hate speech, that suddenly became a permanent feature of their reportage, once went unreported – until the 2011 post-election violence which was primarily blamed on hateful utterances of political leaders (Ezeibe 2021). Therefore, this article critiques the failure of EOGs to generically capture the deluge of electoral prophecies that may have adverse effects on the electoral process and the survival of democracy, especially for a highly charged political environment such as Nigeria's.

Hence, we examine the 2019 election reports of the Commonwealth Observer Group (COG), the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM), the National Democratic Institute (NDI)/International Republican Institute (IRI), The Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advance (YIAGA), and the Situation Room report which is a joint report of several civil society groups (CSOs). To do so, the study is structured into sections: following this introduction is a section that deals with competing viewpoints on election observation missions. The next parts discuss African spirituality and electoral democracy, as well as locating prophecy within the present electoral structure. The section on discussing hate speech as opposed to prophecy is then followed by the conclusion.

### **Contending views on election observation mission: the unsettled debate**

Election observation involves the purposeful gathering of information regarding an electoral process, and the making of informed judgements on the conduct of such a process on the basis of the information collected (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 1997, 8). The primary aim of election observation is to detect and, where possible, deter electoral fraud. Election observation may make political parties or politicians with the intent to perpetrate electoral fraud shelve the idea rather than carrying it out (Carothers 1997). While there seems to be a consensus that observer groups can deter fraud and ensure general confidence in the electoral system, there are certain contentions in the mix (Kelley 2012). Whereas there have been some acceptances, there have also been rejections and claims of bias. Nevertheless, election observers have expanded and brought recognition to a set of 'best practices' internationally acknowledged in the administration of elections (Carothers 1997). Therefore, emphasis is placed not just on election, but on the manner in which it is conducted (Kelley 2012). Thus, competitive elections encouraging the principle of free and fair choice and respect of the people's choice is greatly advocated, and considered an acceptable international norm. With the democratisation wave, the number of EOGs has increased (Carothers 1997). Anglin (1998) notes that election observation gained momentum after the collapse of the Cold War and the subsequent democratisation wave that spread across several regions giving impetus to the emergence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) in election observation. It is now a norm for emerging democracies to invite observers to assess the quality of the election (Kelley 2012). Election observation is a means through which emerging democracies secure international approval and legitimacy (Anglin 1998). It showcases a country's ability to conduct its political affairs, and it is an essential attribute for attracting aid from developed economies and multilateral organisations. Election observation is the best-established, most visible, and often best-funded type of democracy-related assistance (Carothers 1997).

There have been arguments about the operational dichotomy and rating of domestic and foreign EOGs. Foreign EOGs are often rated higher than local ones because they are believed to be impartial and not susceptible to manipulations from political actors and/or parties (Luttrell and Nash 2008). Foreign EOGs are, however, not completely free from influence. There have been instances where some foreign EOGs tried to foist a neo-liberal agenda on some developing democracies, and subtly advance their home countries' foreign policies, without considering the internal peculiarities in those societies (Omotola 2006).

Election observers, local and foreign, are known to sometimes turn in conflicting reports on elections (Omotola 2006; Kelley 2010). In this kind of scenario, the winning party embraces the reports favourable to the election outcome but disavows the ones to the contrary. This was the case in Nigeria during the 2003 elections where the EU-EOM, NDI/IRI, and domestic observer the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), expressed misgivings about the elections in their reports, pointing to varying irregularities and frauds. On the other hand, the Commonwealth Observer Team (COT), the African Union (AU) and few other domestic observers praised the elections and affirmed the victory of the then ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Omotola 2006). Accordingly, President Olusegun Obasanjo, who returned for a second term, responded through one of his campaign coordinators to those who condemned both presidential and governorship elections as follows: ‘such a verdict was not unexpected of the EU and its agents. The West and its agents already had a mindset, even before the elections, having been under the notion that nothing good could come from Africa’ (Omotola 2006, 160). To mitigate undue foreign interference in elections, domestic EOGs have been charged to take full responsibility for observation because they are deemed to be ‘more cost-effective, more knowledgeable, linguistically more mobile, available for longer periods, and perhaps more observant of what really matters’ (Anglin 1998, 491–492).

Regardless of differing viewpoints, we believe the distinction between domestic and foreign observers, as well as their ratings, is unimportant because some observer groups in Nigeria are highly regarded in terms of skill, professionalism and credibility. These organisations have the ability to bring international clout and pressure to bear on perceived election irregularities, or to persuade political actors of the importance of a free and fair election. More importantly, their reports were comparable to those of their foreign counterparts in terms of neutrality, rigour, quality and scope of topics covered. Several foreign election observers, in fact, frequently collaborate with local observer groups based on their expertise and institutional capacity.

Observers’ findings are usually encapsulated in a report, which is then provided to key stakeholders such as the government, the electoral commission, civil society organisations and the general public. The reports of these observation groups played a big role in former President Musa Yar-Adua’s spectacular electoral reform (Adebisi and Loremikan 2013). Scholars argue that election observers contribute to a successful democratic transition as well as its consolidation (Omotola 2006). Essentially, election observers act as go-betweens between the government and the general public, and their reports are supposed to highlight flaws that could jeopardise the electoral process or even democracy. In this context, the failure of accredited election observers to recognise the increased occurrence of election prophecy in their reports has raised worries about possible oversight. Worse, the manner in which these Christian leaders recite these forecasts appears to be in violation of existing electoral law restrictions.

### **Situating election prophecy within the existing electoral/legal framework**

Election prophecy is the Christian leaders’ non-scientific forecast of political outcomes attributed to divine, transcendental and sacred realms. Put differently, it is the sharing of privileged spiritual insight into the likely outcome of an election. Sackey (2017, 49) sees it as pre-election declarations in the public sphere, pertaining to the outcome of national

elections, by religious clerics who attribute their revelations to the will of God. Secularity scholars consider such prophetic speaking harmful to the deliberative mode of public opinion formation in democratic societies because of its absolutist and non-accommodating stances on political issues, and therefore argue that such interference should be restrained from the public sphere (De Kruijf 1994). Although maintaining the liberal stance on the separation of the state and church, Habermas (2005) argues that the notion of democratic legitimacy expects the political inclusion of religious voices in the public sphere.

As a democratic nation, freedom of expression is a right guaranteed in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended). To this extent, the frequently expressed prophetic declarations during election could be seen to be consistent with this enshrined right. However, the 1999 Constitution (as amended), the Electoral Act (2010 (as amended)) and the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act (2015) discourage utterances capable of undermining the electoral process. Particularly, Section 95 (2) of the Electoral Act (2010 (as amended)), apart from prohibiting abusive and slanderous language, states that insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions shall not be employed or used during political campaigns. Perhaps this is to prevent the deployment of hate speech or demeaning language by politicians, given the deep-rooted religious and ethnic sentiments that could trigger election crisis in Nigeria (Ezeibe 2021). In particular, Section 95 (3) (b) of the Electoral Act (2010 (as amended)) states that places designated for religious worship shall not be used to promote, propagate or attack political parties or candidates, or their programmes or ideologies. Interestingly, some of the election prophecies that certain Christian leaders have released were done in places designated or used for worship. Most times, these election-related prophecies come in forms that apparently promote and propagate a political party or candidate, while at the same time attacking others deemed to be allegedly divinely destined for defeat. Moreover, Section 24 (b) of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act (2015) prohibits anyone from intentionally sending a message that may cause ill will or needless anxiety to the public.

The reality, however, is to the contrary. Prophet Samuel Akinbodunse declared prior to the 2019 presidential election that President Muhammadu Buhari would die if he attempted to contest, maintaining that his candidacy was not divinely approved. Other clerics prophesied that Buhari and his political party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), had been divinely rejected and would not win the 2019 presidential election unless it was rigged. Prophet Wale Olagunju insinuated in his prophecy that a replacement for Buhari had been found and, therefore, his opponent was destined to win. According to him, 'God said Buhari had become a disappointment in his sight and He (God) had sought and found a man after his heart to replace him' (quoted in Alagbe 2020, para. 22). For his part, Prophet Ugochukwu Amaukwu prophesied that the presidential election result would be a subject of disputation as the 'ruling party retains power by all means,' implying that President Buhari would rig himself back to power regardless of popular votes (Eyoboka 2019). These utterances may have affected the political choice of some people, especially the followers of the candidates in question. While it may not be feasible to give a specific estimate, a BBC survey in 2005 showed that Africans expressed trust in their religious leaders and their influence on their decision-making (Ferrett 2005). Also, a recent Afrobarometer survey shows that 69% of citizens' said they trust religious leaders a lot, compared to 52% and 43% who say the same about their president and members of parliament, respectively (Howard 2020, 2). Interestingly, Nigeria was among the several countries involved in this survey, and the majority of those



surveyed expressed higher trust for their religious leaders than for political or traditional leaders or any government institution, such as the electoral commission. As remarked by Koopman (2014), religiosity, in the sense of reverence for transcendence and as adherence to institutional faith, is growing in African politics. It ultimately gives credence and legitimacy to the utterances of religious leaders, who enjoy a certain level of moral and charismatic authority over their followers. According to Adibe (2018), prophecy can have a bandwagon effect as it may appeal to the religiosity of followers.

These prophecies tend to challenge the statutory powers of the electoral commission to declare winners and losers in an election. It is noteworthy that election predictions are well recognised in advanced democracies because of the institutionalisation of opinion polls. While these polls may not be error-proof, nonetheless, the high level of objectivity and accuracy put into polls has continued to receive some refinements. In contrast, prophetic declarations are unscientific, and such claims cannot be subjected to any form of scrutiny. As some have argued, the subjective context of election prophecy may make it a manipulative tool or patronage avenue (Edewor 2008; Nwolise 2015; Acheampong 2018; Obadare 2018).

### **African spirituality and electoral democracy: threats of pre-emptive election prophecy in Nigeria**

Political scientists have noted that religiosity in Africa is not solely a private matter. It is a public issue and it relates to power (Meyer 1998; Ellis and Ter Haar 2008; Igboin 2014; Obadare 2018). Religious allegiances of most leaders in Africa are multiple and eclectic, reflecting their quest for state power or desire to attract authority (Ellis and Ter Haar 2008; Igboin 2014). According to Ellis and Ter Haar (2008, 182), 'African politicians typically pay great regard to the spirit world as a source of power', and as a result, 'many heads of state cultivate diviners and marabouts to enhance their authority'. Hence, former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was a professed Christian – a Baptist preacher – was noted for frequenting diviners (Ellis and Ter Haar 2008). This is not unusual among political leaders in Africa, especially in Nigeria. There is a duality of religious and/or spiritual allegiances (Igboin 2014). This is a truism in the light of Max Weber's popular quote: 'he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers' (cited in Ellis and Ter Haar 2008, 182). No doubt, many Nigerians will readily agree with the above assertion. The excerpt below furthers the argument about the fascination of Nigerian politicians with the spiritual world:

An idea central to African concepts of religion – an idea shared by presidents and farmers, ministers and street cleaners – is that not only does an invisible world exist, but it is possible to communicate with it .... If an invisible world exists that is home to spirits – whether Muslim, Christian, or other – and if these spirits are as powerful as people believe, then it makes sense to enlist their help to succeed in this world .... A politician may want something that helps win an election. (Ellis and Ter Haar 2008, 182)

It is the serious search to communicate with this invisible world that makes politicians consult with all sorts of religious specialists, including pastors, prophets, diviners and marabouts, among others. Interestingly, there are several studies on African spirituality and elections that support this view (Marshall 1991, Meyer 1998; Ayantayo 2009; Igboin 2014; Obadare 2018). In particular, Ayantayo (2009) opined that the electoral process in Nigeria is



actually spiritualised, which means that politicians mostly rely on the supernatural realm for help to win elections. In this sense, he notes that success in elections is primarily attributed to divine intervention rather than foresightedness, logical planning, widespread political tours or even good campaigns. Furthermore, party manifestoes are downplayed; rather, prayers are solicited from different quarters. This situation has seemingly elevated the political significance of religious leaders during election periods in Nigeria, and this is evident in how politicians troop into churches, mosques and even traditional shrines to seek to win elections (Ihejirika 2012; Obadare 2018). In this regard, prophecy is used to communicate what is usually considered an endorsement from the invisible world. For instance, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar is reported to be relying on prophecy given to him as the primary motivating factor in his persistent quest to contest for the office of the president of Nigeria (Tijani 2019). According to one account, Atiku met a prophet several years ago who told him that he would become the president of Nigeria someday. Since then, Atiku has contested for the office in an attempt to fulfil that prophecy. The excerpt below corroborates this:

The realities of today show that Atiku is running with those words, whether they were true or not. Everything this person predicted, Atiku has done in the campaign. He is running with a strange kind of confidence – the kind that his billions cannot buy. It may be the prophecy driving him. (Tijani 2019, para. 5)

During Jonathan's presidency, there were different prophecies pointing to his divine endorsement, and the certainty of his re-election. Nwolise (2015, 3) notes, 'The voices of prophets have been so loud over the 2015 general elections and the survival of Nigeria that prophecy has pierced the politics–religion divide into the political domain'. He further states that some of these religious leaders cautioned against violence before, during and after the elections. Others explicitly made prophetic declarations about the possible winner and loser, and some pleaded that election result be accepted regardless of who won. Yet some warned about military interruption, and a possible interim arrangement for transfer of power and disintegration of the country. According to Nwolise (2015), 70 prophets were therefore mobilised to Jerusalem in December 2014 to pray for peace and security in Nigeria, especially in 2015. At this time, Primate Elijah Ayodele had declared that 'Jonathan will be the last PDP President in Nigeria' (Nwolise 2015, 4); however, there were overwhelming prophecies that Jonathan was divinely endorsed to be re-elected for the second term (see Table 1). It was reported that Jonathan seriously courted spiritual leaders, especially church leaders, for their endorsements (Obadare 2018).

It is deducible from Table 1 that an overwhelming number of the prophecies seemed to favour the then president, Goodluck Jonathan. It is important to note that the 2015 presidential election was highly contested along ethno-religious lines (Babalola 2020). The then ruling party, PDP, which fielded former President Goodluck Jonathan, got the majority of its votes from the predominantly Christian South, while his main opponent and the incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari got the majority of his votes from the predominantly Muslim North. Even prophecies intimating the possible win of Goodluck Jonathan no doubt reflected and reinforced this divide. Hamalai, Egwu, and Omotola (2017, 2) remarked that 'the two leading presidential candidates, namely Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, were packaged and largely behaved as though they were bearers of (sic) ethno-regional and religious torch...'. Isah (2019) maintained that such interference, through prophetic

**Table 1.** Prophetic declarations by some religious leaders in Nigeria.

S/n	Name	Prophetic declarations
1	Apostle Johnson Suleiman	I see President Goodluck Jonathan coming back but trouble ... 2015 presidential election will be rigged, marred in violence and end up in court case.
2	Apostle Frederick	Nigerians should watch out for the second term of His Excellency President GoodluckEbele Jonathan .... As long as I'm concerned as a man gifted by God to see the past, the current and the future beyond the curtains of the natural, I know by the inspiration of the Almighty that president Jonathan is the set man for Nigeria .... On this account I therefore declare that HE Goodluck Ebele Jonathan will win the coming elections.
3	Pastor Joshua Iginla	No matter how powerful and organised 2015 elections is, it will be faulted. I am not a politician nor belong to any political party, I am just speaking God's mind. The person sitting on the seat might not be perfect, but he will retain the seat.
4	Primate Theophilus O. Olabayo	To start with God has revealed to me that there may not be elections next year because in 2015, we are going to witness one of the worst political assassinations in Nigeria ... if there will be elections next year in Nigeria, the seat of the president is not vacant.
5	Prophet Michael Olubode	I want to let the people of Nigeria know that the Lord will return His Excellency, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to his presidential seat .... The Lord revealed to me that the purpose of making him remain in government is to use him to build Nigeria's economy.
6	Guru Maharaji	There is no vacancy for Buhari at Aso Rock. President GoodluckEbele Jonathan is the verifiable divine choice of the forthcoming presidential election. As the living Perfect Master of creation in whose hands the fate of Nigeria project lies spiritually, I declare from the above.

Source: The NEWS, April 4, 2015, <http://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2015/04/pastors-who-failed-to-predict-the-2015-presidential-election/> (accessed December 20, 2017) cited in Ikem, Ogbonna, and Ogunnubi (2020, 42), with some modifications.

declarations and overt support for a particular candidate, may trigger intolerance among citizens. As regards the 2015 presidential election, militants from Goodluck Jonathan's oil-rich Niger Delta, supporting his candidacy, soon plugged into the notion these prophecies created to threaten that if Jonathan was not declared winner there would be war (Eziukwu 2015). For instance, the leaders of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) Asari Dokubo, said '2015 is more than do-or-die .... We are going to meet at the battlefield' (cited in Ikeanyibe et al. 2018, 14). Meanwhile the Minister of Niger Delta, Godswill Orubebe, disrupted the national collation of presidential results by accusing the INEC of bias (Agbajileke 2015). The Niger Delta militants also threatened to cut off oil supply and ground the economy of Nigeria. Fortunately, the early concession of defeat by Jonathan constrained the threats by these militants and contributed to the peaceful transition of power (EU-EOM 2015).

In 2019, before the release of the general election timetable by INEC, the public was already deluged with prophecies from various Christian leaders pointing to the winner and loser of the presidential election. Although there were 91 registered political parties, only 73 presidential candidates contested the 2019 presidential election. However, the cynosures of prophetic declarations were focused on Atiku Abubakar of the PDP and his opponent President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC. Worthy of note is that both candidates are Muslims from the northern part of the country. Table 2 shows that while some prophecies were in favour of Atiku Abubakar, others were in favour of President Muhammadu Buhari. Prior to the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria, a video by Apostle David Aderemi Babalola went viral. In it, he declared that Atiku had been chosen by God to be the next president of Nigeria. He subsequently said Atiku and the PDP would come to testify in his church (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKonEsCXiSo>). Others such as Prophet Okechukwu Udoka corroborated this assertion; he said: 'My message to Nigerians is to go out and obey the mind of

**Table 2.** Some prophecies prior to the 2019 presidential election.

S/n	Name	Prophecy	Source
1	Prophet Temitope Aduroja	The 2019 presidential poll 'is going to shock many people'. The incumbent President (Buhari) will have no choice but to accept defeat.	Alagbe 2020 (see reference)
2	Prophet Wale Olagunju	God said it would take his own intervention for the present government to survive total defeat by the Peoples Democratic Party. God said Buhari had become a disappointment in his sight and he (God) had sought and found a man after his heart to replace him	Alagbe 2020 (see reference)
3	Prophet Okechukwu Daniel Udoka	God told me that any man that would want to stop Atiku from entering will go down and might not witness Atiku's celebration of victory .... When the election was going on, it was not favouring APC. I saw a different thing altogether. It was not free and fair.	<i>The Nation</i> 2019 (see reference)
4	Prophet Ekong Ituen	Let me start by telling Nigerians that election result will spring surprises, but in my revelation, it has been established that President Muhammadu Buhari of APC will win the 2019 presidential election	Olafioye, 2019 (see reference)
5	Prophet T. B. Joshua	The election will be closely contested between the two leading political parties but I see Muhammadu Buhari winning	Olowolagba, 2019 (see reference)
6	Pastor Samuel Akinbodunse	Please Nigerians warn Buhari that he is going beyond his boundary. That the Lord said his tenure is once and not twice. If not, he will not see the election .... If he makes a mistake to campaign for the election, before they vote, he will die	Adeniyi and Omogbolagun 2019 (see reference)

Source: Ikem and Ogbonna (2020, 10–11), with some modifications.

God. He has chosen Atiku'. Further affirming Atiku's victory in the 2019 presidential election, Prophet David Babalola revealed that Atiku had been ordained Nigeria's president since 2012. He warned, however, that President Buhari might not agree to hand over power (cited in Ikem 2020, 754). The preponderance of prophecies in favour of Atiku Abubakar might have contributed to the immediate rejection of the presidential result declared by INEC. The PDP claimed that the election results transmitted to an alleged INEC server showed that its candidate, Atiku, won the presidential election with 18,356,732 votes, beating President Buhari who amassed 16,741,430 votes (Obiejesi 2019). Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in favour of the APC, the PDP's National Working Committee (NWC) called for a judicial review of the Supreme Court ruling on the presidential election. According to INEC, President Buhari secured the highest number of valid votes, 15,191,847, representing 55.6% of total votes cast to beat his closest rival, Atiku Abubakar who achieved 11,262,978 votes, representing 41.2%. The constitution stipulates that the winner of the presidential election must receive at least 25% of votes from at least 24 states (two-thirds of the states in the federation). This is to ensure popular acceptance and especially national spread in the election of the president (Adejumobi 2007, 35). According to INEC, Buhari received 25% in 32 states, higher than the constitutional threshold. The APC won the presidential vote in 19 states while the opposition party, PDP, won in 17 states and in the Federal Capital Territory – FCT – (EU-EOM 2019). In the political climate in which elections are conducted in Nigeria, combined with high levels of suspicion and accusations, prophetic utterances may complicate the electoral process and cast doubts on the roles of the election umpire and the judiciary. A 2019 pre-election report indicated that the PDP 'treated every step of INEC with suspicion' and 'questioned its neutrality' (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room 2019, 14). Conversely, the

APC accused the PDP of trying to discredit INEC in order to have a reason to dispute the results if it lost in the presidential election. Thus, it 'created an unhealthy atmosphere filled with suspicion ahead of the elections' (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room 2019, 15).

### **Foregrounding hate speech, neglecting political prophecy: election observers' incomplete reportage of Nigeria's electoral process**

Since the commencement of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, the general outlook of elections in the country is usually gloomy. This is because the electoral environment is excessively polluted by a number of factors that subsequently render the political terrain endangered and slippery (Hamalai, Egwu, and Omotola 2017). Among the factors identified is the ascendant role of electoral prophecies in reinforcing the already politically tense environment. In particular, electoral campaigns in Nigeria are generally devoid of public or governance issues; rather, they are based in casting aspersions on opponents, disinformation and fake news (EU-EOM 2019; Ezeibe 2021). The language of politics especially during campaign periods is always suffused with provocative and offensive rhetoric. This is worsened by 'the ascendancy of doomsday prophesies about the elections and the democratisation process' (Hamalai, Egwu, and Omotola 2017, 3). It is therefore a mistake not to give adequate attention to these precipitating factors, more especially electoral prophecies.

Therefore, the intention of this section is not to review the whole reports of the selected election observers but to restrict the analysis to election observers' reports on issues such as hate speech and how it has come to occupy a conspicuous segment in various reports. This is to give clarity to our argument in a justifiable and concrete manner. Both hate speech and electoral prophecy are utterances issued during the build-up to general elections. While the former is from an identity standpoint, the latter may reinforce or exacerbate it; or it may independently stir violence. Specifically, in this section, we set out to review the various segments on hate speech in the reports of selected election observers *vis-à-vis* electoral prophecy. The 2019 reports of election observers COG, EU-EOM and NDI/IRI were analysed. The reports by domestic EOGs such as YIAGA and the Situation Room report (which is a joint report of several civil society organisations) are analysed too.

The EU-EOM report appears to have clearly undermined its stated mandate for the 2019 general elections, which 'was to observe all aspects of the electoral process' (8). The question that readily arises is whether election prophecy is part of the electoral process or not. There is no doubt that it is a profusely hyped and pronounced aspect of the electoral process (Hamalai, Egwu, and Omotola 2017; Ikem 2020) and, therefore, cannot be said to be otherwise. The report went further to state that the essence of the above mandate was to ensure that parties comply with the existing regional and international commitments for elections, as well as with national legislation. As pointed out earlier, the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) forbids the use of places designated for religious worship for promoting or propagating or attacking political parties, candidates, their programmes or ideologies. Unfortunately, religious worship centres are where most prophecies are declared. As remarked by a constitutional lawyer, Festus Okoye, 'religious leaders must also cease the present unacceptable behaviour of donating their platforms to political parties and/or making futuristic predictions on the party that may likely win the presidential elections' (Akhaine 2015, para. 6). Therefore, the question also arises whether this aspect of national legislation being seemingly violated in a blatant manner should not be an issue of concern.

Similarly, the terms of reference given to COG for the 2019 general elections were to 'observe the process as a whole and to form a judgement accordingly' (Commonwealth Observation Group 2019, 2), implying, therefore, the whole gamut of the electoral process, including the actions and utterances of all stakeholders such as religious leaders. To that extent, observing the whole electoral process as indicated in the terms of reference should naturally include election prophecy. Although the COG report notes that 'there were examples of some faith groups being partisan' (26), there is no mention of the nature of the partisanship. However, COG seems to be the only group to have made a thorough attempt to systematically analyse hate speech.

Hate speech is any utterance or gesture that accompanies utterances, symbol or writing that incites people to violence or prejudicial action (Ikeanyibe et al. 2018, 4). Hate speech is considered a major political strategy in Nigeria to mobilise support and sympathy along divisive lines, while at the same time sowing hate against political opponents – mostly due to the collapse of the rotational presidency between the north and the south (Ezeibe and Ikeanyibe 2017; Ezeibe 2021). Moreover, scholars argue that hate speech can serve during elections as an instrument to manipulate public perceptions and reactions to either those in power or those seeking it, particularly in a multiethnic and religious society like Nigeria. It is mostly agreed among scholars that hate speech violates the dignity of the human person by creating a false consciousness that may trigger political violence and also create violent-prone divisions among electorates along ethnic, religious or political lines.

It is in recognition of this fact that EOGs, local and foreign, have continued to reflect on this disturbing trend. The 2019 joint report by NDI/IRI notes in passing the increased use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp as means of spreading hate speech and disinformation targeted at women candidates or fuelling regional, ethnic and religious differences. The report further observed that hate speech can manipulate public perceptions, heighten tensions and fuel the possibility of election-related violence. Similarly, the EU-EOM (2019, 3), while noting that 'INEC worked in a complex security and politically-charged environment', placed more emphasis on disinformation than on fake news. It observed particularly that various online platforms were used in a distorting manner, by creating the impression of mass support for a particular candidate or party and disseminating false election results (EU-EOM 2019).

For its part, COG notes that 'the personality-based nature of the campaign created an environment in which there was a high incidence of inflammatory language and hate speech throughout the campaign period' (Commonwealth Observation Group 2019, 24). The widely reported threat of Governor Nasir el-Rufai of Kaduna State, that if there was any foreign interference in the 2019 elections such foreigners would leave the country in body bags, was said to have heightened security concerns. Generally, the report notes that political leaders across the board did not make any effort to limit the deployment of hate speech despite signing the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, and their pledges for peace. According to the report, the INEC chairman was concerned about the worrying trends of hate speech and fake news in the 2019 elections. Hence, in its attempt to regulate broadcast content, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) reportedly took punitive sanctions against four prominent TV channels: Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), African Independent Television (AIT), Channels TV and the Television Continental (TVC) for broadcasting hate speech from representatives of the PDP and APC (COG 2019).

For its part, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room report points out that social media was the prominent means of spreading fake news and hate speech. It also linked the clashes between the supporters of PDP and APC in Bauchi, Taraba, Kwara, Edo, Delta, Benue and Oyo states and the Federal Capital City to the use of hate speech by political gladiators (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room 2019). YIAGA in turn notes that hate speech, fake news and disinformation surged after INEC announced the postponement of the presidential election, maintaining that it portends danger to peace and national security. With regards to fake news and disinformation, the report notes that they were deliberately used by politicians and mischief-makers to create fear and apprehension among voters (YIAGA Africa 2019, 16).

Although hate speech and electoral prophecy, along with their implications, cannot be conceptually equated, both take place within an electoral context, and thus they are deserving of attention. Studies have shown that hate speech triggers political violence (Ezeibe and Ikeanyibe 2017; CLEEN Foundation 2018; Benesch 2019; Ezeibe 2021), and so could electoral prophecy (Sackey 2017; Ikem, Ogbonna, and Ogunnubi 2020). Moreover, even as hate speech could be used to manipulate public perceptions, so too could prophecy. For instance, a damaged image of a candidate or party could be mended with religious rhetoric such as prophetic declarations, and make the candidate or party appealing to those among the electorate who believe the prophecies (Wolpe 2016). Those who may be influenced by this action are generally referred to as *prophecy voters* (Duin 2021). Despite the overwhelming import of electoral prophecy, it has not received the kind of attention accorded to hate speech.

More importantly, these election prophecies receive wide readership through notable national dailies and magazines such as *Vanguard*, *Leadership*, *Premium Times*, *Punch*, *Tribune*, *Guardian*, *Sun Newspaper*, *The Nation* and *The NEWS*, among others. The rise in the use of the Internet has intensified the propagation of prophecies. It must be pointed out that prophecies by religious leaders are generally directed to the public; however, not all such prophecies receive wide attention and commentary. This is because the social and political standing of individual religious leaders differ, thus determining their readership.

Reverend Father Ejike Mbaka, popularly known for his political prophecies, had in his 2019 new year message announced that a new government was coming to Imo state, and admonished his members as follows: 'lift your candles as I bless Hope Uzodinma; and I empower him to, spiritually, to take over' (Asadu 2020, para. 5). This pronouncement was made despite the fact that both the Election Tribunal and the Court of Appeal had respectively affirmed INEC's declaration of Emeka Ihedioha of the PDP as winner of the 2019 Imo State governorship election. This pronouncement was deemed to constitute contempt of court since the case was before the Supreme Court for determination. This drew the ire of civil society groups such as the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA), which expressed shock over the silence of the Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) and the entire hierarchy of the Supreme Court of Nigeria on the contemptuous act of Reverend Father Mbaka. According to HURIWA, Mbaka was behaving like a political *agent provocateur* working with forces bent on creating confusion and chaos in Imo State. It further noted that since Reverend Father Mbaka gave the prophecy, a cloud of political uncertainty had pervaded the state (HURIWA 2020), alleging that the Supreme Court judgement may have been leaked to Reverend Mbaka by someone within the Supreme Court. It went further to demand the Supreme Court speak up and clear the foggy political climate that resulted



from the anarchic prediction made by Reverend Father Mbaka. See HURIWA's position on the issue below:

HURIWA is demanding that the Supreme Court of Nigeria say all that it knows about the Catholic cleric, Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka who made a categorical statement about a matter before the Supreme Court of Nigeria and has restated his prophecy that Imo State Governor Emeka Ihedioha would lose his seat this 2020. (HURIWA 2020, para. 5)

Reacting also were the Imo State chapter of the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN), the Christian Association of Nigeria, and the Catholic Bishop of Owerri Ecclesiastical Province Imo State. Specifically, the President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), Archbishop Augustine Akubeze, declared that

Anyone who pronounces a particular candidate as God's anointed political leader is not speaking for the church. We must make it clear once again that no cleric is expected to use his position or ecclesiastical property to promote what appears to be partisan politics. (Nwosu 2021)

To avoid further public panic, the government of Ihedioha dismissed Mbaka's prophecy, and urged the public to trust in the Supreme Court to deliver justice. Reverend Father Mbaka reacted thus: 'Ihedioha and co should go and relax. This is not unprecedented, it happened to Jonathan, Atiku and Peter Obi and after everything, my prophecy came through' (Asadu 2020, para. 9).

Astonishingly and unexpectedly, the Supreme Court ruled that Hope Uzodinma of the APC was the duly elected candidate for the 2019 Imo State governorship election. Consequently, the Court voided INEC's declaration of Emeka Ihedioha of the PDP as winner of the said election. The Supreme Court premised its judgement on the exclusion of the results of the 388 polling units INEC had cancelled citing electoral irregularities (Obe 2020). The court admitted the results of those polling units, and that gave Hope Uzodinma the highest number of votes in the election. This judgement was heavily criticised by the PDP and CSOs. The party, corroborating the view expressed by HURIWA, contended that Reverend Father Mbaka's prophecy was a scheme intended to cover the Supreme Court's fraud. As a result, the national leadership of the party called for a nationwide protest which was held in some states, while the National Chairman of the Party led protesters to the American Embassy and the British High Commission in Abuja to register their grievances and to call for their intervention (Ogunwale 2020). Some supporters of Emeka Ihedioha even threatened to make the state ungovernable for Hope Uzodinma, and were reported to have vandalised some government property (Udemba 2020). Similarly, the rejection of the outcome of the 2019 presidential election as announced by INEC and the judgement of the Supreme Court by Atiku and PDP may not be completely divorced from the spiritual assurances and pre-election prophecies that put him above the incumbent, Muhammadu Buhari.

Despite the pervasiveness of prophecy in Nigeria's electoral process, and its possible implications for the survival of democracy, election observers have largely ignored it. Its neglect may give it more impetus, thus making the future electioneering process more difficult than it should be. Thus, it is plausible to surmise that the reports of election observers remain incomplete until this critical aspect of the electoral process is reflected in them.



## Conclusion

This article highlights the importance of election observers including electoral prophecy in their reports, as it has been common in Nigeria. It is not uncommon for the media to be inundated with prophetic predictions pointing to the likely winner or loser in an election before the names of political parties and candidates are released by INEC. The prophecies may affect Nigerians' choice of party or candidate in an election, according to this article, because Nigerians are predominantly religious. Nigerian elections, in particular, are always held in a tense and volatile environment. Prophetic declarations, which are frequently made along ethno-religious lines, may exacerbate the fragility. Therefore, election observers may need to focus on certain parameters, such as prophetic utterances of Christian leaders that might instigate a post-election crisis (as was the case for Imo State) or stir hate among groups. Already, some of these observer groups are in constant touch with religious leaders during the election period, as partners in ensuring that the process is free and fair. For this reason, religious leaders should refrain from making partisan statements that might be hijacked by politicians to score political goals. The Christian Association of Nigeria may also bring its pressure to bear in this regard. More importantly, EOGs must report the trend of election prophecy as proactive to dissuade its continuation.

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