



# Neo-Pentecostal political activism vis-a-vis good governance in Nigeria: A theological analysis

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**Research Project Registration:****Project Number:** 04653484**Project Leader:** Jerry Pillay

**Description:** This research is part of the project, 'African Christianity and Development', directed by Prof. Jerry Pillay, Department of Historical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Received: 04 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 28 Oct. 2022

Published: 07 Feb. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Orogun, D.O. & Pillay, J.G., 2023, 'Neo-Pentecostal political activism vis-a-vis good governance in Nigeria: A theological analysis', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2670. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2670>

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This article presented the Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism (NNPA) in the last two decades and its impact on good governance. A brief historical analysis shows that pulpit political activism (PPA) may have catalysed some civil actions by civil society, socio-cultural groups, adherents, and the masses; however, the resistance from the government may imply that the struggle is counterproductive. Subsequently, the situation calls for a theological examination of the activists' praxis through the lens of three sub-theological disciplines, namely social gospel, political and public theologies. It is argued that the NNPA is neither based on any of the three theological sub-disciplines nor any other specific theology. Thus, this article upheld that where a struggle for good governance from a Christian perspective lacks a solid theological foundation, its approach may be counterproductive. The article then recommended the need for NNPA to evolve through a constructive theology with the adoption of some concepts from the three theological sub-disciplines, especially public theology.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article aligns with the scope of *Verbum et Ecclesia* as it created a conversation around dogmatic and historical theologies, socio-political interaction and African neo-Pentecostalism.

**Keywords:** Neo-Pentecostals; political activism; public theology; political theology; social gospel; good governance.

## Introduction

Political activism, which is defined by Aver'janov (1993:431) as a 'social group or individual activity, directed to change or improve social, economic, and political institutes', has become part of the activities of the Nigerian neo-Pentecostals<sup>1</sup> (NNP). The American Heritage Dictionary (n.d.) applies the word 'confrontation' to describe the nature of political activism. Such a description fits the NNP approach in their socio-political engagements with the government. Sadly, the politicians in some cases appear to be defiant to such a struggle. In other cases, pulpit political activism (PPA) creates conflicts between religious leaders and political elites.<sup>2</sup> This is evident by the attempted and actualised arrest of some pulpit activists.<sup>3</sup> Such pulpit activism with potential political tension, civil unrest, and church-state leadership crises reveal the loophole in the activists' approach. Thus, the crux of this article is to show that the ineffectiveness of PPA in Nigeria may be caused by the activists' theological premise. Firstly, a brief history of some pulpit activists' reactions will be presented followed by counter-reactions from the government. Thereafter, Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism (NNPA) will be placed under the lens of the social gospel (SG), political and public theologies. Finally, the outcome of the critique will lead to recommendations for effective PPA.

## Brief history of some neo-Pentecostal political activists in Nigeria

Although there are more pulpit activists, a few and outspoken ones will be discussed. The essence is to establish the existence of pulpit activism against corruption, social injustice, inequality, poor

1.The Institute for Advance Studies in Culture (n.d.) defines Pentecostalism as a global movement, which comprised various related charismatic, Pentecostal, and Neo-Pentecostal groups. Although the Neo-Pentecostals emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, those referred to in this article are the newer African versions of the 1980s to date. See details at Orogun and Pillay (2021).

2.In the Nigerian context, the compound word 'Pulpit Political Activism' has been coined by the authors as an action of some neo-Pentecostal clergies through their verbal expressions from the pulpit against the government of the day on issues bordering on socio-political issues and poor governance.

3.For instance, Tunde Bakare has been arrested and detained by the government (see Agbenon 2014:1-3). Likewise, Prophet Isa El-Buba has been hunted by the Department of Secret Service (DSS) under President Buhari's administration (see Nwachukwu 2018).

governance, nepotism, tribalism, and disregard for the rule of law. It should be clear at the end of this section that some Nigerian neo-Pentecostal leaders are pulpit activists who speak 'their truth' to power when the need arises.

### Tunde Bakare

The pastor of the Citadel Global Community Church (CGCC) is Tunde Bakare, a renowned lawyer.<sup>4</sup> He appears to be the loudest pulpit political activist in Nigeria as he continues to confront anti-democratic practices and dictatorship. The United States Department of State (1999) reports that the radical televangelist had his transmission cut off during heated criticism of the military Government's programme for a return to civilian rule, in which he alleged that the main presidential candidate would be assassinated by the armed forces. Indeed, rarely has there been any Nigerian president who escaped the criticism of Bakare. According to Odunsi (2013), Bakare stated that 'former President Abdulsalami looted more than Abacha and Obasanjo is no better' (Odunsi 2013). These were three military Presidents consistently criticised by Bakare.

Also, Agbenon (2014:2) accounts that Bakare was the convener of Save Nigeria Group (SNG), a group responsible for putting pressure on political leadership with a focus on good governance. The group worked against the re-election of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and faulted his electoral reforms.<sup>5</sup> Bakare was not only criticising the political leaders but also speaking to citizens on election matters. In a Sunday morning message titled 'The State of the Nation', he called Nigerians to patriotic action in voting (Bakare 2019). In recent times, even though Bakare remains President Buhari's ally, he condemned nepotism, abuse of human rights and poor governance perpetrated by the Buhari administration. This is evident in his support for the Nigerian youth who demanded the abolition of police brutality (Belo-Osagie 2020). In this case, Bakare challenged the government to fish out state officials who ordered the killing of young Nigerians protesting police brutality and injustice.<sup>6</sup> In July 2021, in his Sunday morning message, he vowed on the pulpit to stage another nationwide protest titled 'Nigeria for Nigerians'. Using the story of Saul as a rejected king in the Old Testament, Bakare states that because of bad governance and oppression of the masses, 'the spirit of God had departed from President Buhari' (Bakare 2021). In his words 'the highest position in the country is of the citizens and not the president, therefore Nigerians are going to rise and demand their rights' (Bakare 2021). Bakare upholds that God will anoint another leader as Nigerians rise to fight for their right. Bakare remains the fiercest preacher against military dictatorship, anti-democratic activities, corruption, and human rights abuse in Nigeria.

4. Founded in 1989, CGCC is a Pentecostal Church in Lagos, formerly called the Latter Rain Assembly until it was recently renamed. The church has thousands of members and followers across the globe. See details at <https://thecitadelglobal.org/#>

5. See further details at <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/06/2011-save-nigeria-group-faults-jonathan-on-electoral-reforms/>

6. See details at <https://www.channelstv.com/2020/10/25/lekki-shooting-unravel-killers-of-endsars-protesters-bakare-tells-buhari/>

### David Oyedepo

As the Presiding Bishop of the Living Faith Church Worldwide, Oyedepo is a vocal neo-Pentecostal leader who confronts poor political leadership.<sup>7</sup> He is deeply concerned about how Nigeria is governed. His motivation can be traced to his teaching on leadership. As recorded in a video clip, in a Sunday morning message, Oyedepo states that:

I am a stakeholder in running the affairs of Nigeria by divine election. While I do not belong to any political party, the welfare of Nigeria is uppermost in my heart (Oyedepo 2018:n.p.).

Earlier in the message, using Ezekiel 3:17–18, Oyedepo states that 'Prophets are God's watchmen not just over people in church but over nations' (Oyedepo 2018). Thus, his political activism may not be unconnected to his claim as a watchman divinely elected by God to pay attention to how the nation is managed (Oyedepo 2017).

Oyedepo speaks boldly against ethnic cleansing, nepotism, land grabbing and other injustice-related issues. He strongly condemned the killings of women and children, pastors, and priests by bandits and herdsmen. He accused the government of making no attempt to arrest the killer-herders because they are the President's kinsmen (Oyedepo 2019). According to Olatunji (2018), Oyedepo maintains that poor governance is responsible for inept political leadership. Oyedepo continues to criticise the leadership of President Buhari. He calls Buhari's government an evil one because it encourages the killing of Christians. He further accuses the government of perpetrating a strategic jihad. Using Psalm 7:11, he proclaims that God is angry with the wicked government.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Oyedepo calls for the resignation of Buhari (Salimon 2020). In 2020, Oyedepo spoke against the hate speech law formulated by the Buhari-led administration to muzzle the media and critics of bad governance. He calls it a draconian law. Like Bakare, Oyedepo supports the youth protesting against police brutality and injustice across Nigeria. He condemned the killing of protesters in Lekki, Lagos.<sup>9</sup>

### Paul Adefarasin

As the Prelate of House on the Rock (HOTR) Churches, Metropolitan Adefarasin is an eloquent speaker and the son of a former High Court Judge.<sup>10</sup> His thoughts on political activism may be traced to two imperatives: the sense of justice as a son of a former judge and the vision of the Rock Cathedral. During an interview with Ajayi (2014) on Christianity, politics, and leadership, Adefarasin affirms that the Rock Cathedral is a Social Justice and Transformation

7. Founded in 1981, Living Faith is a Pentecostal Church spread all over the world with headquarters in Otta, Ogun State with millions of members and followers across the globe. See details at <https://faithtabernacle.org.ng/contact-us>.

8. See Oyedepo's reaction on killings across the country at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpBJEbEIoSE>

9. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJyKCC9Z1MA>

10. Founded in 1994, HOTR is a multiethnic neo-Pentecostal Church spread across the globe with headquarters in Lekki, Lagos with over 20 000 worshippers globally. House on the Rock hosts the largest Christian music festival in the world called the Experience. See <https://houseontherock.org.ng/lagos/about-us-2/>

Centre, for special interventions in leadership, technology, education, training, and empowerment, among others. In addition, Adefarasin delineates the acronym [www.neulif.se](http://www.neulif.se) as the core value of HOTR. The first three letters represent Warfare (Prayer), Word (Preaching) and Worship. The 'Neulife.se' represents Networking, Excellence, User-friendliness, Leadership, Innovation and Empowerment, Fellowship, Social Responsibility, Embracing Diversity and Training (see Ajayi 2014). Thus, his family background, ministry core values and the social significance of the Rock Cathedral support his political activism. Little wonder that he continues to criticise political injustices and bad governance in Nigeria.

For example, on political injustice, Adefarasin publicly declares the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as fraudulent and evil concocted by Lord Lugard when he amalgamated Nigeria. He argues that the census, which claims that Northern Nigeria is more populated is fraud. Adefarasin opines that the Nigerian population cannot be more in regions with a lesser body of water. Thus, it is a political fraud to allow Northern Nigeria to continuously dominate political power. Adefarasin reiterates that it is his job as a religious leader to cry for redistributive justice (wealth and political power) in Nigeria (Adefarasin 2021a). Also, he supports young people who protested against police brutality at Lekki, Nigeria and made speeches against the killing of innocent Nigerians by the Fulani herdsmen (Adefarasin 2021b).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Adefarasin practises some form of PPA. This has been corroborated by Reuben Abati, the Senior Special Assistant to the former President of Nigeria who describes Adefarasin's engagements as 'Political activism from the pulpit' (Abati 2021).

### Enoch Adeboye

As the pastor of the largest Pentecostal church in Nigeria, Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) holds a strong influence over many neo-Pentecostal leaders and millions of Nigerians.<sup>12</sup> Although he is diplomatic, he presents subtle criticism of the government and his comments always come weighty on bad governance. For instance, amid insecurity and killings across Nigeria by herdsmen, rather than confront the government's perceived silence on the carnage, Adeboye leads a prayer procession across the land with a placard that reads 'All souls are precious to God' (Sahara Reporters 2020). This action does not only represent a prayer walk but also a diplomatic criticism of government's insensitivity to unwarranted killings. Shortly after the prayer walk protest, Adeboye took to the media and advised President Buhari to restructure the country and avert disintegration (Channels Television 2020). Meanwhile, restructuring has been a front-burner issue

11. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb4r3vGdbN0>

12. Founded in 1952, RCCG is a global Pentecostal Church, the single largest neo-Pentecostal church in Africa with mega and mushroom branches scattered all over the world. The church hosts the largest Christian gathering annually called 'Holy Ghost Congress'. It has huge political influence as it has produced a Vice President, Cabinet Ministers, Senators, among others. See details at <https://newsroom.com/how-the-redeemed-christian-church-of-god-became-one-of-the-most-influential-churches-in-modern-history/>

raised by the civil society and many regional agitators who felt that the tribe of the President through nepotism had disenfranchised other regions. Indeed, Adeboye demonstrates political activism in agreement with many agitators, socio-cultural and civil liberty groups across the county. Also, Adeboye joined the criticism of police brutality (Olufemi 2020). By implication, Adeboye motivates millions of Nigerians to increasingly demand equity, justice, and good governance.

### Isa El-Buba

Prophet Isa El-Buba is from the Northern region. He is the General Overseer of the Evangelical Bible Outreach Ministries International (EBOMI) domicile in Jos, Plateau state. He hails from Borno State (the seat of Boko Haram operations in Nigeria) and remains the boldest northern figure who speaks against bad governance, genocide, abuse of human rights and nepotism. Like Bakare, he maintains a highly confrontational approach. For instance, in 2018, El-Buba's strong words against bad governance went viral when he accused the president of aiding and abating the killing of Christians and the Islamisation agenda in Nigeria. He went on to challenge Nigerians to rise and vote against President Buhari in the next election (El-Bubah 2018). More recently, he accused the President of building his government on lies (Abraham 2021).

In addition, the pulpit political activism is not limited to the selected Neo-pentecostal leaders discussed so far. The likes of Apostle Johnson Suleman, Pastor Sarah Omaku, Pastor Paul Enenche, Rev. Sam Adeyemi, Prophet Joshua Iginla, and Pastor Itua Igodalo, among others engage in PPA.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the speeches and messages of the selected neo-Pentecostal leaders delineated in this section show brief historical activities of their pulpit reactions against corruption, social injustice, inequality, poor governance, nepotism, tribalism, and disregard for the rule of law. But the question of theological classification of their pulpit activism remains unanswered. Are they engaging in the SG, political or public theology? The question will be addressed later but, in the meantime, the Nigerian government's reactions will be discussed next.

## Government's reaction as evidence of the impact of Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism

The response of the government agencies may be a yardstick to determine the effectiveness of NNPA in Nigeria. When constructive political criticism from the pulpit is acceptable to the government, the outcome may be improved governance. As narrated in the preceding section, Adeboye had criticised the government and called for restructuring in Nigeria. Sadly, his opinion was jettisoned. Ekwowusi (2020) reports that Garba Shehu, the Senior Special Assistant to the

13. See details at <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/255417-oyedepo-enenche-flay-attacks-herdsmen.html>

President on Media and Publicity described Adeboye's comment as an unpatriotic outburst, unhelpful and unwarranted. He then insisted that the government will not succumb to such a threat and pressure (cf. Daka 2020). Although restructuring may engender a better Nigeria, the resistance to such demand by the government may be a result of the 'approach'. The government perceived Adeboye's call as a threat rather than a contribution. On the one hand, the government's response reveals that the voice of the pulpit activists is loud in the nation. On the other hand, it indicates a counterproductive effort of the pulpit activists. It may then be inferred that confrontational and emotional pulpit actions may not necessarily motivate those in the corridors of power, although church adherents, the masses, civil society groups and related pressure groups can be influenced to intensify pressure in their demand for restructuring.

Furthermore, when the Nigerian National Assembly reviewed the trusteeship clause of the *Company Allied Matters Act (CAMA)* to check mismanagement among religious and non-governmental organisations, Oyedepo reacted vehemently as the President signed the amendment into law. In response, Bolashodun (2020) reports that Lauretta Onochie, one of the presidential aides in Buhari's administration accused Oyedepo of bullying the government. Clearly, the government perceived Oyedepo's confrontational approach as a bullying exercise on the amended CAMA. Despite Oyedepo's reaction, the amended policy was not reversed. This buttresses this article's earlier assertion that the current NNPA approach can be counterproductive. It shows that Pentecostal pulpit activism has minimal or no impact on the government's actions or inactions. Furthermore, the arrest of Tunde Bakare as discussed earlier and several attempts to detain the likes of Prophet Isa El-Buba and Apostle John Suleman by the Directorate of Secret Service (DSS) are pointers to government reactions.<sup>14</sup> The question then is why are these pulpit activists hunted by the government. Perhaps they have influence over the masses and their words can spark civil reactions. Thus, the government's attempt may be to silence the voices that speak truth to power. It is then not incorrect to infer as a conclusion in this section that NNPA in Nigeria influences and motivates the masses to protest against bad governance, even though their efforts are often resisted by the political elite. The question then remains whether the pulpit activists need to take another approach to influence the government for good governance. This article will now look at the NNPA from a theological perspective discussed next.

## Nigerian neo-Pentecostal Political Activism through the lens of theological sub-disciplines

Systematic, historical, biblical, and practical theologies are the main theological branches. With emerging socio-political

14. See DSS attempt to arrest El-Buba at <https://topcelebrities.com.ng/pastor-isa-el-buba-got-dss-trouble/> and <http://www.nigerianmonitor.com/prophet-isa-el-buba-allegedly-arrested-dss/>. See attempted arrest of Johnson Suleman at <https://punchng.com/drama-fayose-foils-dss-plan-arrest-apostle-suleman-ekiti/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPo66vuP9Eg>

issues across the globe, theology continues to evolve into sub-disciplines such as SG, black, political, public, liberation, and legal theologies (see Doe 2017:64–70). Given the socio-political context of Nigeria *vis-a-vis* religious interventions, this article views the NNPA through the lenses of the SG, political and public theologies. This does not imply that other sub-theologies cannot be explored.

## Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism through the lens of political theology

Phillips (2012:2) points to three ways to describe how and when political theology (POT) came into being. Firstly, she points to the Jewish and Christian scriptures as the beginning. Harmoniously, Yoder in Phillips (2012:13) argues that the New Testament portrays Jesus as a political figure, killed for political reasons. He describes the church as a political body gathered as a political witness of Jesus that followed him in a political tradition. Secondly, Phillips (2012:24–25) asserts that scholars identify Augustine's *The City of God*, as the pre-eminent founding text of POT, because it was one of the early church historical discussions on the interaction of the church with the political systems. Correspondingly, Kirwan (2009:59) maintains that the two-kingdom model of Augustine, re-interpreted countless times in history by the likes of Luther, became fundamental to the establishment of POT. These two cities are interwoven, existing in the same space and time and making use of the same materials and resources simultaneously throughout human history (cf. ed. Dyson 1998:632). Thus, this forms the basis for the political interaction of the church with the political systems. Thirdly, Phillips (2012:25) identifies 20th century academia as the group that promotes the emergence of POT. Noteworthy is the record of Levesque (2014:24) who claims that within academia there is no consensus on when and where POT originated.

Furthermore, using the contributions of the likes of Abraham Kuyper, John Calvin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others, Kristen (2019) states that Christian POT refers to any effort at probing the implications of the church's beliefs, practices, and scriptures for political, social, and economic realities. This may entail probing the theological assumptions of political movements, practices, and theories, whether secular or Christian. Kristen (2019) asserts that the term 'political theology' initially emerged from a 1922 book titled *Political Theology* by the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt. Although what Schmitt called POT had evolved, the idea was all about using theological indices in the political terrain to legitimise political powers or entrench political sovereignty (see Schmitt 1922). In other words, POT is used by a selected few with political authority to justify extraordinarily political measures to prevent chaos. Contrarily, the likes of Van Wyk (2015:2–3) and Moltmann (2013:3), among others have tagged Schmitt's work as an 'Old Political Theology'. Seeing that the concept allows some form of oppression, injustices, tension or collision between Christianity and political regimes, they

opted for the 'New Political Theology' with concern for the oppressed and alienated individuals rather than an established infallible state (cf. Metz 2013:13). Kristen (2019) relates that some German and American theologians and feminists are examples of those who leveraged such theological shift to construct liberation theology with emphasis on 'God's preferential option for the poor'.<sup>15</sup> In his opinion, this is how the new Christian POT is generally understood in contemporary times.

For Clayton (2014), the key ideology criticised in POT is secularism, that is, the autonomy of a secular realm from religious interests. Correspondingly, Clayton (2014) recommends a radical POT where both religion and politics are up in the air, a position that does not endorse a specific religious perspective, nor dismiss religion or denigrate it as a complex human activity. While Kristen (2019) maintains that POT will be an ongoing conversation, two points were emphasised. Firstly, POT is deeply rooted in Christian or biblical truth. Secondly, POT is an ongoing phenomenon because it has always been a response to emerging situations in human society. By implication, emerging issues in society will continue to inform the evolution of POT. Thus, it will be an ongoing conversation as long as issues arise in human society.

Although, there are other scholarly opinions on the definition of POT, Levesque (2014:24) as noted earlier observed that, there is no consensus on the discussions around POT. This was further made clear in the analysis of Cole (2017) where he delineated different scholars' arguments on the definition of POT and concluded that almost all the definitions and concepts are not without gaps (imprecise and vague notions of the 'political' in theological discussions), including scholars who pointed a third angle to the discussion of Kirwan.<sup>16</sup> Some of them include Cavanaugh and Scott, De Vries and Sullivan, and O'Donovan Oliver.<sup>17</sup> To fill this gap of concepts and definitions of POT, Cole then thinks that POT can be better conceived as an art and not an academic discipline. He then redefines POT as governance, an art of

15. Some of the first theologians who used this phrase are Latin American theologians such as Dorr 1983, Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, among others. But in an African context, black theology, as a political theology, relates to the oppression of black people. For example, in South Africa the theology addresses racism and socio-economic inequality as it deals with black and white inter-racial phenomenon (see De Villiers 2011; Koopman 2009; Kumalo 2009; Vellem 2010). But in Nigeria, a society with an intra-racial narrative, political theology remains within a socio-political context *vis-à-vis* good governance.

16. Because the scope of and limitation of this article restricts us within the boundaries of brief delineation of POT, we recommend further reading – 'Thompson-Uberuaga's Reading and Commentary on Michael Kirwan's Political Theology'. See details at [https://voegelinview.com/a-reading-and-commentary-on-michael-kirwans-political-theology/#\\_ednref5](https://voegelinview.com/a-reading-and-commentary-on-michael-kirwans-political-theology/#_ednref5)

17. Cavanaugh and Scott conceived POT as the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world. They seem to suggest that beyond Kirwan's delineation, POT discussions cut across different disciplines. See Cavanaugh and Scott (2004). Hent de Vries thinks that POT is about power relations, and ever-changing relationships between political community and religious order, or between authority and salvation. See details at De Vries and Sullivan (eds. 2006). Oliver O'Donovan thinks POT is about an earthly political discourse from the political language of religious discourse, and the Bible is the lens of the discussion, its interpretation and application by the church throughout history. But this definition still leaves open the question of what precisely the 'political' in 'political discourse' denotes, other than that the 'political' and 'theological' are interwoven. See details at O'Donovan (1996:1–97).

'asking, answering, and acting upon the implications of answers to theological questions related to governance' (Cole 2017). This article agrees with Cole's notion of POT juxtaposed with the 'New Political Theology' (see Metz 2013:13; Moltmann 2013:3; Van Wyk 2015:2–3) and the pontification of Thompson-Uberuaga (2018) who brought forward the summary of Kirwan's POT as a two-way relationship through 'dialogue' between church and State.<sup>18</sup> Interpretively, POT in the Nigerian context may be better viewed as the contemplation of the church in conversation with government on issues that promote preferential option for the poor, justice and good governance.

Viewing NNPA with the lens of this article's contextual interpretation of POT *vis-a-vis* the scholars' opinions discussed here, the narratives show divergence. While POT is a developing Christian ideology rooted in biblical theology as a response to societies' socio-political problems, NNPA appears to be a reaction from the pulpit without specific theology. As the scholars opine, POT is rooted in concerns for the oppressed and alienated individuals, preferential option for the poor, demands for justice and good governance. Thus, the theological argument against NNPA rests on the question: What is the theological base for NNPA? The brief history of some neo-Pentecostal political activists in Nigeria narrated earlier in this article did not provide an answer to this fundamental question. Rather, it inferred that an emotional reaction born out of Christian conviction, mixed with a sense of human and social rights, and embellished with some scriptures, drives the struggle of the Nigerian neo-Pentecostal pulpit activists. It is noteworthy that emotional reaction, which is expressed in political pulpit activism is fundamental in the Pentecostal culture. It also applies to worship styles, prayers, preaching, prophetic healing and miracles. Therefore, going by the divergence between POT and NNPA, it can be argued that NNPA is not the same as POT.

## Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism through the lens of public theology

Ausaf (1995) defines public theology (PUT) as a:

[M]ode of religious-social thought, ethical discourse, and expression of opinion on public issues, chiefly those that concern the understanding and resolution of the problems of contemporary society, polity, economy, the conduct of everyday social life, and the operation of the social, political, and economic institutions in the collective life of people. (p. 67)

In addition, De Gruchy (2007:26) states that PUT can be broadly defined as 'a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance'. In a South African context, Koopman opines that PUT centres on convictions of

18. For Thompson-Uberuaga (2018), dialogue gives expression to the two-way relationship between Church and society or state, but now in the better sense of each enriching the other. It is not just the Church which is called to critique and potentially enrich the other. It works the other way too. At times society and state call the Church back to its 'better self'.

God's bias for the wronged, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and an ethic of hybridity. To fulfil a transforming and humanising role in contemporary society, Koopman (2015:23) claims that 'public theology needs to stand where God stands – namely, with the wronged and against dehumanisation, injustice, and oppression'.

While POT may give preference to Christianity and its dogma, PUT differs as it gives preference to the inclusivity of religions. In the assertion of Jayme (2016) and De Gruchy (2007), PUT focuses on the common good of all (Christians and non-Christians). Correspondingly, Ausaf (1995:72) explains that it does not represent the imposition upon a religiously pluralistic society a specific sectarian creed. For De Gruchy (2007), public theology requires informed knowledge of 'public policy' on issues arising. Concurrently, it requires a sharp equivalent analytical evaluation of such issues using theological critique. Jayme (2016) further explains that PUT underscores the suffering and oppression of people and communities, and that it speaks to their pain and comfort via the message of hope and solidarity. It equally weighs the action of perpetrators of such oppression and speaks to them through prophetic rebuke and recommendation of the ideal in a clear ethical and theological view.

Ausaf (1995:70) further claims that PUT has a prophetic mode that concerns itself with the basic concepts, issues, and problems of the social order, such as racism, oppression, bigotry, injustice, poverty, exploitation, inequity, morality, family, education, among others. The prophetic mode is an attempt to bring back the concerns of the prophets of the Old Testament and the compassion and love of Jesus. On the operational procedure, Ausaf asserts that PUT is firstly 'dialogical, but not relativistic' (Ausaf 1995:72). By implication, public theologians, whether professorial or priestly, depend exclusively on the method of rational persuasion. In this regard, they do not coerce others to gain support for their favourite public policies. Rather they allow theoretical understanding and robust discussion to constitute the preferred method of PUT.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, they do not just depend on the do's and the don'ts from the revealed texts or religious law books; they incorporate their environment's circumstances in their discussions. Secondly, they reach a 'Consensus' via reflection in their discussions, especially on the basic constitution of society and the concept of righteous social life (Ausaf 1995:72).

Given the explanations discussed here, there are similarities between POT and PUT. Agreeably, Jayme (2016) observes that PUT will be political because it is very little in the way it is not political. However, Sebastian (2011:21–22) holds that when it comes to working in the public space with people of other religions, PUT is a more effective construct to communicate the ideals of inclusion, social justice, and the way religion supports or speaks against evil. Consequently,

19. Part of the process of rational persuasion is seen in the effort of Late Vuyani Vellem's robust, scholarly, and articulate discussions in public theology that critique the policies of the post 1994 government on urbanisation (Vellem 2014:1–6).

while POT and PUT may have some similarities, NNPA is not rooted in the duo. The divergence between NNPA and PUT is clear. As discussed earlier, some neo-Pentecostal pulpit activists use a confrontational approach which is often perceived by the government as 'emotional outburst and bullying'. Likewise, perceiving Adeboye and Oyedepo's statements as unpatriotic, emotional, and bullying implies that the NNPA does not engage in rational persuasion, consensus, and multireligious approach. Thus, NNPA is not rooted in PUT. As mentioned earlier NNPA appears to be a combination of conviction-led emotional reaction, a sense of human and social rights, embellished with a few scriptures to drive the demand for good governance. Nigerian neo-Pentecostal Political Activism is reactive, emotional, and confrontational, whereas PUT is rational and persuasive. By implication, NNPA is not the same with nor connected to PUT.

## Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism through the lens of social gospel

Oshatz (2021) accounts that SG was a movement led by liberal Protestant progressives in response to the social problems caused by the rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and increasing immigration of the Gilded Age. Social gospel prioritises social salvation over individual salvation. Although the heralds of the social gospel based their appeals on liberal theology, they usually showed more interest in social science than in theology. However, the difference between them and secular activists remains their vision, not just to see an equitable power balance but a Christian society where social-economic classes' conflict, competition and greed are substituted by cooperation, mutual respect, and compassion. According to Dorn (1967), the SG activists claim that to honour God, personal earthly desires must be set aside and concerns for others especially the needy must come to the fore. They condemned hoarding wealth and encouraged sharing with the less fortunate in society. Beyond agitations, they provided settlement houses and numerous opportunities to the less privileged including access to education, free or low-cost healthcare, and housing, among others. Regarding 'approach', Painter (2008) relates as an example the effort of Washington Gladden, the leading advocate of the SG in America who encouraged his congregants to play an active role in community life by attacking immorality in their fellow citizens and government officials. Furthermore, Oshatz (2021) reports that by the mid-1890s, the SG had the support of multiple denominations and a strong foothold in interdenominational organisations.

Examining NNPA with the lens of the SG, it becomes clear that 'confrontation' and a united voice in social action are two points of convergence. However, there are weightier points of departure. Firstly, the SG advocates encourage sharing with the less privileged and confront hoarding wealth. Whereas some of the Nigerian neo-Pentecostal activists including a few discussed earlier under the brief history section, encourage wealth

accumulation and flamboyant lifestyles.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, while SG focuses on critiquing government officials, and fighting for the rights and welfare of the underprivileged in communities, the NNPA focuses on the incompetence of political authority with less attention to individuals and communities. On a priority scale, unity of purpose in a confrontational approach cannot outweigh the import of providing community social service while concurrently confronting social-political injustice. Thus, NNPA is technically not the same as SG. Why? Social gospel champions focus on piety, non-materialistic culture, taking responsibility for social and community development as against the NNPA where wealth accumulation, less attention for social and community development and confronting the government for non-performance is the order of the day. Overall, in this section, each subsection argues that NNPA is not the same as SG, POT and PUT. This article will now make some recommendations in the next section.

## Recommendations

Noticeably, the Nigerian pulpit activists confront dictatorship, corruption, human rights violations, police brutality, ethnocentric and electoral injustices, nepotism, ethnic cleansing, anti-freedom of speech policies and disrespect for the rule of law. While their genuine intentions are commendable, 'confrontation' which in itself can be seen as a prophetic action as in the case of South Africa, may not be sufficient to influence the political class to deliver good governance (see Koopman 2015; Velle 2014:1–6). This then calls for a theological review of the pulpit activists' modus operandi. Firstly, the neo-Pentecostal pulpit activists need to ask if their struggle is grounded in theology. Secondly, the purpose of their action must be defined. In this regard, they need to make it clear if their purpose is to engender political reform or provoke good governance. If the answer is affirmative, a conversation that addresses theological questions on PPA must be brought forward as a strategy to close the theological gap. Using the position of Jayme (2016) and Sebastian (2011:21–22), among others, this article recommends that such a theological gap can be closed chiefly by developing or adopting specific theology for a socio-political struggle against bad governance. For example, concepts can be adopted from PUT, especially the rational and persuasive approach discussed earlier while viewing NNPA with the lens of PUT. Where prophetic actions fail, rational and persuasive alternatives can provide result-oriented struggle. Even though a tailor-made theology for the Nigerian context is imperative, this article posits that tested and tried theological concepts with results in other contexts cannot be ignored in the Nigerian struggle. Below are further practical recommendations.

### Change of approach: From confrontation to interaction, dialogue, and partnership

Confrontation as a form of prophetic action worked in other climes such as South Africa; however, if it does not produce

20. See their accumulation of wealth in Orogun (2020:102–140). See details at <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/85751>; See also Orogun and Pillay (2021).

results in Nigeria, the flexibility of the pulpit activists can allow the use of alternatives such as dialogue and partnership as discussed earlier while critiquing NNPA with the lens of POT and PUT. Given the history of how political crises snowball into religious killings and vice-versa, pulpit activism in Nigeria demands caution.<sup>21</sup> Confrontation can create unnecessary political tension and snowball into religious riots and killings across the country. To avoid such, decorum and words salted with grace as encouraged in Colossians 4:6 are necessary. In a sensitive climate such as Nigeria, the pulpit should not be used as a war desk. The corrections, caution, and criticism from the pulpit must have an underlining purpose – to repair and not to destroy. More so, as earlier mentioned, dialogue with political leaders from the ward to the federal level should be an alternative approach. The two cities' interaction models of the secular and spiritual or church and state discussed earlier while critiquing NNPA with the lenses of POT and PUT suggest the need for collaborative interaction. Also, going by Pillay's counsel, dialogue may require partnership. In his words 'In addressing poverty, the church needs to recognise that it needs to have partnerships with government, business and society' (Pillay 2015: 8). With dialogue and partnership, the pulpit activists may influence the political class to provide good governance.

### Neo-Pentecostal political activism must be ideological

The brief description of the history, definitions and concepts of POT and PUT mentioned earlier shows that theological indices are utilised in the formation of philosophies for political sovereignty. There must be a theological ideology in the neo-Pentecostal socio-political struggle. Such ideology needs to transcend a Christian view; it needs to consider legal, social, cultural, historical, and multireligious matrices that fall within the most moral and ethical principles of righteous and social life for all.<sup>22</sup> Concomitantly, the PUT section of this article points to the imperativeness of acquiring knowledge in 'public policy' on issues arising and a sharp equivalent analytical evaluation of such issues using theological critique. This ideological concept is a replicable model for NNPA. Rather than an emotional and non-ideological response to government's policies, analytical evaluation, theological and non-confrontational critique can be alternatives. Open rebuke without ideological substance cannot induce any positive change in the socio-political space.

### Neo-Pentecostal pulpit activists need to embrace the 'charity begins at home' culture

There is a need to show more examples. Issues of injustices, tribalism, ethnocentrism, abuse of the rights of adherents,

21. See historical record of religious crisis and socio-political influence at <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/religious-violence-in-nigeria/> and <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/oir/ethnicity-politics-land-religion-and-deadly-clashes-jos-nigeria>

22. Legal matrices suggest that neo-Pentecostal pulpit activists need a comprehensive knowledge of public policy and constitution while critiquing and interacting with government officials.

associates, and staff through wrong application of spiritual authority doctrine and dictatorship must be addressed. When charity begins at home, there will be an increased moral authority to speak truth to power. As described earlier under PUT section, the concerns of academics and priests in PUT include addressing issues related to racism, oppression, bigotry, injustice, poverty, exploitation, and inequity, among others. By implication, responding to socio-political issues goes beyond confronting an oppressive government and related perpetrators, but also providing socio-economic support to affected communities (Christian and non-Christians). Equally, as Pillay (2015:7) advised, the church has two responsibilities, namely to 'change and challenge oppressive and dehumanising structures and systems in society'. Consequently, neo-Pentecostal political activists need to constructively challenge perpetrators on the one hand and change the situations in communities on the other hand. To engender good governance and positively changing situations in communities require partnership with the government and other stakeholders.

### The pulpit activists need to embrace citizenship engagement

From the earlier historical narrative of the NNPA, the pulpit activists focus more on what the political elites should do to engender good governance. Given the resistance, 'citizenship engagement' can be an alternative. When the political class jettisons the call for good governance, engagement with citizens and voters, training and teaching the citizens on their rights to decide who governs them will change the political atmosphere. Nigerian neo-Pentecostal political activism should not be about the elites in power alone but also those who voted them in power. Thus, concentration on citizenship rights, persuasive voter education and inspiring citizens' ballot power can be the game changer. With this strategy, bad governance can be addressed through electorates' decisions. Thus, bad leaders can be changed without any counterproductive emotional reaction from the pulpit.

### Conclusion

This article showed that NNPA under theological examination had little or no influence on the elites in power. However, it can provoke mass socio-political actions by the electorates, civil society, and other pressure groups. Furthermore, while such activism comes with genuine intention, it may remain counterproductive in relation to those in power if confrontation (an emotional expression characterised as Pentecostal liturgy) remains the only strategy to speak truth to power. Thus, where a struggle for good governance from a Christian perspective lacks a solid theological foundation, its approach may remain counterproductive. Finally, the article recommends the need for a strong theological foundation, flexibility of approach and the integration of good concepts mainly from PUT and subsequently from the SG and POT.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

The article is co-authored by D.O.O. and J.G.P. with equal participation. It is a work between a Postdoc Fellow and the Promoter on 'The Economics of Religion and Socio-economic Development in Africa'.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was approved by the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion, with reference number T013/22.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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