

PERCEPTION ENGINEERING AND ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGNS IN NIGERIA IN THE LIGHT OF JUDGES 9:1-6: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

By

AJIBOLA, Michael Oluwafemi & ADEMOLA, Julius Olajide Ph.D
Department of Christian Religious Studies and Philosophy
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State
phemmyahi@gmail.com

Abstract

Politics and electioneering campaigns have created a lot of issues socially, morally, culturally and religiously. It has divided people along ethnic and religious lines and therefore posed a serious threat to corporate co-existence and harmony enjoyed in the Nigerian society. This study compared the electioneering campaign strategies of Abimelech in Judges 9: 1-6 and the ones seen in Nigeria. The study employed socio-historical, hermeneutical and comparative methods of research. The result of the findings show that the campaign strategies of both Abimelech and Nigeria are similar, characterized by divisions along ethnic and social lines, lies and propagandas, selfishness and pride, use of political mercenaries and thugs, misappropriation of public funds, violence and bloodshed. This work concluded on the note that the Christianity does not support the use of any of these strategies to win elections and political aspirants should desist from their usage. The study recommended that Christians should participate in electioneering process at every level they are privileged to, but they must continue to practice the tenets of the Christian faith and they should also be agents of socialization in the nation.

Keywords: Politics, Electioneering Campaigns, Christianity.

Introduction

The subject of politics in Christianity is often greeted with mixed reactions. Although the Bible encourages believers to give honour to the human government of the day (Romans 13:1), but adherents of Christian faith in Nigeria hold diverse and often times contradictory views about participating in partisan politics. This differential, especially in African Christianity is historical. The early missionaries frowned at partisan politics and taught their converts not to be involved in it (Adetoyese, 2005) probably because of the perceived belief that it has the potency of corrupting the innocent minds and as a way exporting the western orientation of the popular "separation of Church and State". These have remained with the African church for a very long time. African evangelicalism, however, holds a different opinion. African evangelicalism is a hermeneutical orientation in Africa that holds that the essence of Christianity is not only about spending eternity with Christ at the end of the age, but is equally concerned with the relevance of Christians on earth and in the various systems that govern it, politics inclusive (Dairo, 2017).

One very important aspect of politics, especially in a democratic system of government is electioneering campaigns. Election of suitable candidates into political offices is the heart of democracy and it is the system in which great nations are built (Uzonwanne and Ezenekwe, 2016) and electioneering campaign is an important factor in every electioneering process. Through electioneering campaigns, candidates woo the electorates to themselves by the use of various strategies in order to do their bidding. Because of the importance of electioneering campaigns to the outcome and overall success of political office seekers and their political parties in an election, strategies often deployed, especially in the Nigerian political system are often negative and usually detrimental to nation building. The Christian tenets and practices are at variance with negative and destructive electioneering campaigns strategies.

The campaign strategies of Abimelech, one of the sons of Gideon, in an attempt to occupy the vacant leadership position the demise of his father who ruled over Israel caused in the light of what the Christian faith holds and teaches about electioneering process and political campaigns was examined in this work using socio-historical, hermeneutical and comparative methods of research.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the “Capture Theory” of politics as a structure to explain its position. The Capture Theory of politics was developed by George Stigler and expanded by Duncan Black (1948), James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962) and others. The theory holds that decisions do not just appear independently but as a result of well-crafted interests that must be secured. Literarily, the word “Capture” is seen as the act of seizing or being in possession of something by force or by superior power (Onuoha, 2008). By implication, it is believed in the political parlance that anyone that wins a given election captures the state and wields so much power and control to him or herself. As a result, those who propounded the Capture Theory of politics are of the opinion that State Capture is the shaping and formation of the basic rules, laws, decrees and regulations through illicit and corrupt private payment to public officials. The state captors have wielded much economic power to themselves capable in buying over the interests of the electorates. The Capture Theory of politics succinctly describes Abimelech’s political campaign strategy. He had carefully crafted thoughts and plans to capture his immediate environment and rule forcefully over the people. With the assistance of few aristocrats from his maternal line, his plans were well executed, but did not last. Everything eventually crumbled.

Election and Electioneering Campaigns in Nigeria

According to Obikaeze and Udalla (2016), it includes all kinds of activities and strategies that are put in place aimed at encouraging the electorates to cast their votes for or against a candidate or a party in the context of an election. In Nigeria, electioneering is one of the most delicate responsibilities of the electorates, the most popular civic responsibility with regularized procedure (Onigiobi, Obadiora and Oriowo, 2020). However, Nigerians show great apathy for electioneering process. But political office seekers, having a clear understanding of this menace, usually try to sensitize and motivate voters to be involved in the process and support their political interests. This informs why aspirants try to put up the best performance and give convincing proofs to show the voting population they were better candidates than their opponents.

Electioneering campaigns, according to Uzonwanne and Ezenekwe (2016) is a process within the confines of the law that enables a political office aspirant to desire interest in a particular political office and mobilize the electorates to support his or her political ambition. In most cases, candidates depend so much on the synergy of members of his or political party in ensuring the overall success of the process. As a result, electioneering campaigns are most times organized effort that seeks to influence the choice of the electorates during election (Momoh, 2019). Though there is the pre-modern, modern and post-modern electoral campaigns (Norris, 2005), but they are all aimed at winning the interests of voters using different communication platforms that technology is able to provide at a given time. Karlsen (2010) calls the pre-modern, modern and post-modern periods the newspaper stage, television stage and digital stage respectively.

The essence of these political campaigns in the opinion of Omilusi (2020) quoting Trent and Friedenbergl (2014) are to provide reasons for voters to retain faith in the political system, provide citizens the freedom to select their leaders and providing the privilege to examine how the interests of the political office seekers can be best served while conferring legitimacy on those elected to govern. Because of the importance of electioneering campaigns in the entire electioneering process, a campaign strategy is usually put in place. The political party with the best campaign strategy all things being equal, usually come out victorious in a given election (Kriesi, 2009). A campaign strategy is a proposed pathway to victory motivated by the understanding of who will vote for the candidate and why they will cast their votes (Brashaw, 2004).

In summary, electioneering processes, which involve campaigns, have to do with the totality of the activities involved in campaigns, sensitizing and spurring the citizens of a country for elections. Arowolo and Alako (2010) and Nkwede (2019) are of the opinion that electioneering processes do not only influence the electorates but also the electoral body conducting the elections. The electioneering process do not begin on the day of election or a time too close to it; it starts a long period before the actual day of vote casting and electioneering campaigns are usually characterized by their intensity and directions (Kriesi, 2005).

Electioneering Campaigns in the Bible from the time of Moses to David

The political structure and situations in the Bible were irregular; they vary according to the particular time in history. Theocracy, which is the direct rule of God through his priests, was the system of governance and it does not involve any electioneering process or campaign. The priesthood, thus could be regarded as both the religious and political system of governance in the early period of the development of the Israelites. God led the covenanted people through Moses (and Aaron) and after the death of Moses Joshua came on board by divine election. The leadership of Joshua was immediately followed by the period of Judges, which was characterized with lots of usurping of positions and assassinations fuelled with the facts that “another generation grew up after them (after Joshua and that whole generation) who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10) and “in those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Although the priesthood was still functioning skeletally, it lost the power to provide political leadership to the people. As a result, even though there was still the body of law to guide and regulate the conduct of the people, those who should enforce it appeared to lack the political will to do so, so morality and ethical living was at the mercy of the judgement of the people.

While God was directly involved in the selection of certain individuals that emerged judges over the people such as Othniel, Ehud, Deborah (and Barak), Gideon Samson, to provide leadership, someone like Shamgar appeared to have come into leadership by chance, while someone like Abimelech came to power against God's will for wrong reasons and with the use of a wrong political strategy. It was Abimelech that introduced what could be likened to electioneering campaign to the political system of the Old Testament. But it was a negative electioneering campaign. Divine election of people in theocracy needed no campaign because it was all God's responsibility and the people are to accept whatever God's choice was for them.

Following the period of Judges, there was a restoration of the priesthood emerged with prophetism. Eli and Samuel served as both priests and prophets. But this leadership style did not continue as the people canvassed for a monarchical system of governance. This did not go down well with Samuel and it was not also God's desire, but the monarchy commenced in Israel through what could be referred to as God's permissive will. Just like the priesthood, God was the determinant of who the king of the people would be. He chose Saul and later replaced him with David. The eventual covenant God made with David made his sons to reign over Judah during the divided monarchy. While there was so much political instability in the Northern Kingdom like it was during the period of the judges, the Davidic dynasty was more stable because of the Davidic covenant. Thus, the United Monarch as well as the Davidic dynasty during the Divided Monarchy needed no electioneering campaigns. What was close to an electioneering campaign during the United Kingdom was the activity of Abner who promised David to woo the Northern Kingdom and the entire loyalists of Saul's dynasty to David so as to make David rule over all, as a result of the rift between him and Ishbosheth, the son of Saul over Rizpah, Saul's concubine (2Samuel 3:7ff). Abner campaigned for David before the elders of Israel and before Benjamin (2Samuel 3:17-19). However, before Abner was able to deliver on his promises, Joab and Abishai his brother murdered him (2Samuel 3:20-30). The entire Israel eventually submitted themselves to David and he eventually reigned over them. Though Abner was already able to send signals to them, but it was not his campaign, but God's covenant with David that made him rule over all.

Electioneering Campaigns in the Light of Judges 9:1-6

Judges 9:1-6 clearly explains Abimelech's intention to establish a monarchical system and rule over the Israelites. His father, Gideon had initially received this offer on the platter of gold after his conquest over the Midianites, but he rejected the offer immediately (Judges 8:22-27). Gideon's response to the people showed that he understood the political structure of Israel very well that theocracy and not man's rule was the order. But Abimelech had a different mindset. Abimelech was one of the sons of Gideon born to him by his concubine, a Shechemite, who was originally a slave in his household (Judges 9:18). But unlike Gideon, Abimelech wanted power by all means. The position was not offered to him, but he offered himself for the position. This, however, was a strange practice in Israel; hence, Abimelech must have been influenced by the practices of the ungodly nations around him. In what could be regarded as his electioneering campaign for ascending the throne, certain things can be drawn from the narrative:

Campaign along ethnic and racial divisions. Abimelech campaigned on ethnic lines by going to his mother's brethren (vs. 1) He appealed to the people based on his family-tie/bloodline. He was preferred not because of what he could offer, but on racial difference. The people of Shechem were adhered to him not on integrity, but for who he was to them. Their basis for

choosing/accepting him was “He is our brother” (vs. 3), because that was the only thing sold to them (vs. 2) and they accepted him on the line of ethnic division. Ajibade (2012) referred to this electioneering scenario between the Shechemites and Abimelech as *omowani, e je o se* (he is our son, let him do it), which is the bane of Nigeria’s political electioneering campaigns.

Campaign along the lines of social class. Abimelech’s target was the aristocratic class to capture the electorates. The Hebrew word translated “citizens” in verse 2 is *ba-a-lei*, which means, owner, lord. So, he did not go for grass root campaign, but went for the rich and wealthy in the land who could probably persuade and buy over others to his favour. This is exactly what the Capture Theory means; it was a corrupt campaign strategy.

Campaign influenced by selfishness and pride. Abimelech had an exaggerated opinion of himself. He considered himself being better than 70 others of the same father who definitely were better spirited than him. He did not have the intention of serving the people or representing God among them that those before him demonstrated. His intention was basically selfish and egocentric. Abimelech’s campaign lacked an agenda or the good he wanted to bring to the people. His ambition was just to rule over the people. He had no interest of the people at heart; he was only concerned about himself. Any leader with such a mindset is bound to fail.

Campaign along the lines of lies and propagandas. It is never possible for 70 sons of Gideon to reign over the people at the same time. Besides, the other 70 sons were not of the same mother, just as he was also of a different mother. But Abimelech painted a very wrong picture of the enter situation. He just wanted only him to be seen while others were beclouded. His campaign was hinged on lies and propagandas, painting before the people what were not true; just for them to see his self-acclaimed rivals in the bad light.

Campaign illegally financed by public funds. Seventy pieces of silver were given to Abimelech by the aristocratic class, not from their personal possessions but from the house of Ba’al-be’rith. Ba’al-be’rith was a temple in Shechem. Ancient temples in cities served as depositories where personal and civic funds were kept. The payments of vows and penalties, as well as gifts, were also part of the temple treasuries. The funds at Ba’al-be’rith could be regarded as public funds. It is out of these funds that Abimelech’s selfish political ambition was financed. This shows irresponsibility and lack of accountability from this aristocratic class. Rather than being the voice to the voiceless, they were gullible and in wickedness struck deal with Abimelech to accomplish his destructive tendencies. They paid back the good which Gideon, Abimelech’s father had done to them by entering into unholy alliance with Abimelech to destroy Gideon’s progenies.

Campaign characterized with political mercenaries and thugs. With the public funds received, Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows. These were political thugs that would help him actualize his selfish political ambition. The use of mercenaries to accomplish political or military goals was common in the Ancient Near East and in ancient times. Jephthah (Judges 11:3), David (I Sam. 22:1-2), Absalom (2 Sam. 15:1), Adonijah (I Kings 1:5), Rezon (I Kings 11:23-24) and Jeroboam (2 Chr. 13:6-7) all had them. But what these individuals usually turn out to be is largely dependent on the personality of their leader. Jephthah and David impacted the lives of the mercenaries with them for the benefits of their nation.

Campaign characterized with bloodshed and destruction. Abimelech's political ambition and campaign was a bloody one. One a single day and on a single stone, he (probably with the assistance of the thugs he had hired) murdered the lives of 69 of his 70 innocent half-brothers. He did this probably because he saw them as rivals and office contenders with him and to establish his rule over the people without fear of being attacked. His political ambition was deadly. Unlike the statement credited to President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 in a bid for securing another term in office that "my political ambition is not worth the blood of any Nigerian", for Abimelech, it did not matter the number of people that would die as long as he could secure a position of rulership.

A Comparison of Abimelech's and Nigerian Electioneering Campaigns

There are lots of similarities between Abimelech's political campaign and the electioneering processes we see in contemporary times. One may even be tempted to say that Abimelech's electioneering campaign is what influenced many of today's political office seekers. By law, electioneering process is meant to be regulated, but in today's Nigeria, we see a lot of flippant disregard for law and other guidelines that are put in place. Electioneering campaigns in Nigeria is grossly along the lines of ethnicity and religion. The part of the nation an individual comes from and the type of faith he practices are the first yardsticks that are used in measuring the capability and acceptability of a candidate. Rather than consider the integrity and the will of an individual to serve his fatherland, Nigerians are divided on ethnic and religious lines. Political parties understand this very well and thus use it as a tool for manipulation, which eventually causes further divisions and disintegrates national unity. It was the strategy of Abimelech and it is never in tandem with the tenets of the Christian faith.

Many of this aristocratic class in Nigeria have large followings that are made up of individuals they have caused to heavily depend on them for their survivals. This situation has made many of them become lords and godfathers over the people and thus, whatever they say is established. Uzonwanne and Ezenekwe (2016) are of the opinion that such people are meant to be agents of socialization in the electioneering process as they are expected to instil a sense of commitment to work for the common good that would lead to the establishment of an ideal society. But like the lords and house owners at Shechem, a good number of these people were corrupt and had lost their sense of judgement because of their selfish ambition. Agents of socialization have roles to play in electioneering process (Disca, 2015; Fronos, 2016), but if they are not positive with the roles they play and influence they have for the good of all, a whole lots of damage would be done. This is the current situation of Nigeria political sphere, which need to be addressed and fixed.

Selfish interest is another bane of Nigeria's electioneering process. This makes candidate to be overzealous and wants to deploy every means to assassinate the character of others who they see as rivals. It was a selfish ambition that made Abimelech see himself as better than the entire seventy of his half brothers. While it is expected that a political office holder in an electioneering campaign is expected to attract the support of others to himself and tries all he could within the confines of the law to win the admiration of a good number of the electorates, he or she is not expected to do so through self aggrandizements and putting the characters of others down, but his or her motivation should be with the love in his or mind for the nation and with genuine intention to serve.

Momoh (2019) notes that electioneering activities in Nigeria are devoid of morality and good values. This is seen in the use of vulgar languages, hate and inciting speeches, lies, propagandas and deceit against a candidate of an opposition party through various means. This was the same strategy deployed by Abimelech to win the hearts of his people. Ogigi (2015) reports a former Governor of Niger State, Babaginda Aliyu to have said that there is no morality in politics, because all it entails is telling lies and those who cannot tell lies have no place in politics. He further counselled that any political candidate that wants to uphold honesty or morality should rather pick up a job as an imam or pastor (Ogigi, 2015). All these are at variance with Christianity; they are not the Christian way of life. Furthermore, conducts of elections in Nigeria are usually violent. Although there are bodies such as Election Management Body (EMB) that have been set up to make sure electioneering processes are done in the right way, but violence are still being noticed nonetheless (Nachana-aAlahire, et al., 2015). So much public funds are being lavished on electioneering process, which eventually causes serious setbacks to the national economy (Uzonwanne and Ezenekwe, 2016).

The cost of electioneering campaigns and process in Nigeria is too high and this is one of the causes of corruption that is seriously putting the nation in a bad light among the comity of nations and decreasing the living standard of an average Nigerian on daily basis. In the bid to the year 2023 general presidential election in Nigeria, the sale of presidential form went for One Hundred million naira (N100, 000,000.00) and twenty-eight (28) presidential hopefuls bought the form totalling N2.8Billion (Vanguardngr.com). After the emergence of a candidate at the primary level that would represent the entire party, huge chunk of money would then be lavished on the electioneering process. It cannot be true that all the funds spent for the purchase of forms and electioneering campaigns were gotten legitimately by the aspirants and parties, a good chunk of these funds could be ill-gotten wealth at the expense of the welfare of nation's citizens. This was also the case with Abimelech's electioneering campaign where public funds were given to him, which he used for his selfish interests.

The most pathetic of these negative electioneering campaigns is the shedding of innocent blood of citizens as a result of violence that usually erupt prior to during and after elections. Like the murdering of 69 innocent humans on a single by Abimelech, Nigeria political space still suffers from socially induced political violence (Obikaeze and Udalla, 2016). Many promising Nigerians have been victims of such killings for being either rivals in an electioneering process or for coming all out to condemn certain anomalies. All these are not Christian tenets and are not in the best interest of the nation.

Christianity and Electioneering Campaigns in Nigeria

The Christian religion is opposed to lies, propagandas, theft, greed, wastefulness, selfish interests, pride, and bloodshed, which characterized both Abimelech's electioneering campaign and the electioneering process in Nigeria. The Christian faith in contemporary times does not stand against electioneering campaigns in a bid to electing viable and competent political candidates to public offices in a democratic system of government, but it is opposed to all forms of illegalities that usually go with the political system in Nigeria. Christianity is premised on love, communal living, unity, brotherliness, and above all peace and so there is need to influence the political space of Nigeria with tenets of Christian faith. Both the Old and New Testament teach that believers should be a voice to the voiceless and defend the course of the poor. And any corrupt person cannot be a voice to the marginalized.

Conclusion

Electioneering campaign is a cardinal aspect of every electoral process in a democratic government. The system of government in the Old Testament before the monarchy was theodicy, which did not require any electioneering process. This paper had compared the electioneering campaigns of Abimelech in Judges 9:1-6 with what is seen in Nigeria. The electioneering campaigns in both are similar and negative. However, the Christian faith does not support negative electioneering campaigns that are highlighted in both situations. Christians may have different views about partisan politics, but it is the thesis of this paper that as a secular nation, Nigerians regardless of religious and denominational affiliations are expected to cooperate with other stakeholders to ensure peaceful electioneering process.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Voting should be made mandatory in Nigeria to put an end to voter's apathy.
- ii. Christians should participate in electioneering process at every level they have the privilege, but they must continue to practice the tenets of the Christian faith.
- iii. Negative electioneering process should be discouraged at all costs. Christians should not be involved in such. A good number of Christians in Nigeria attend churches and more often than not are loyal to their pastors. Pastors should therefore use their influence over their parishioners to discourage them from participating in negative electioneering processes that give birth to chaos.
- iv. Church leaders should encourage and support members of their churches with political ambitions but ensure they are good representatives of the Church. This can be achieved through emphasis on the pulpit and personal counselling.
- v. Electoral bodies put in place to regulate electioneering process should be strengthened and adhered to for peaceful conduct of electioneering campaigns and elections.
- vi. Through seminars and workshops, Christian leaders should educate and train their members on how to serve as agents of socialization in the political space, speaking out for the voiceless and marginalized and against every injustice in the political process.

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