HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

A critical appropriation of Romans 13:1–7 in contemporary African politics

Author:
Benson O. Igboin[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Religion and African Culture, Faculty of Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria

[2]Department of Gender Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Benson Igboin,
benson.igboin@aaua.edu.ng

Dates:
Received: 12 May 2024
Accepted: 21 July 2024
Published: 07 Mar. 2025

How to cite this article:
Igboin, B.O., 2025, 'A critical appropriation of Romans 13:1–7 in contemporary African politics', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a9911. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.9911

Nothing makes the interpretation of Romans 13:1–7 more problematic than the active presence of repressive regimes around the world. The controversies that the interpretations of the text have raised over the centuries have not been whittled down, particularly in Africa. The text has more often than not been invoked to silence oppositions and criticisms of regimes, while enabling bad regimes to continue in their oppressive dealing with the citizens as a strategy for coercive legitimisation. This article raises two important issues that have not received enough scholarly attention. One, it argues that the text cannot be uncritically and universally applied without impugning on the attributes of God and endorsing illegitimate and repressive regimes. Two, it queries whether Christians are duty-bound to 'pray for' regimes that derive their legitimacy from 'God's will' while repressing God's children. The article suggests a contextual approach to interpreting and applying the text, based on how each regime administers their space. It concludes that Christians should practise spiritual disobedience towards 'blasphemous regimes'.

Contribution: The article expands the social ethical and political application of Romans 13:1–7 by arguing that the text cannot be universally applied; a particular regime must be evaluated to determine whether or not it should be obeyed or the level of obedience it can garner from the people. Thus, rather than pray for blasphemous regimes, the oppressed should pray against them as a form of spiritual disobedience to the regimes.

Keywords: blasphemous regimes; civil disobedience; spiritual disobedience; pray against; pray for.

Introduction

This special issue revolves around biblical reception in Africa. The big question is, how should African Christians appropriate and apply Romans 13:1–7 in the midst of inveterate political repression, corruption and illegitimacy and still stay true to God? How would Romans 13:1–7 be engaged in such a way that Christians will not be found to be opposing God when they disobey illegitimate and oppressive regimes? (Igboin 2023a, 2023b). I adopt appropriation to nuance the text, which I consider more poignant for African politics, wherein 'appropriation of biblical texts means that the texts are applied outside of their original historical context to give insight to new issues' (Bergmann 2013:39). Appropriation in this sense confers agency on the receiving context instead of trying to uncritically adopt a text. Given this, the African has the onerous task to understand the historical context that gave birth to a text and to decide whether it can be applied to their historical, cultural and political milieu. Given the increasingly repressive regimes that disguise as democracy, it is appropriate to revisit the text in the context of African politics, but particularly from 'the perspective of the wretched' (Mothoagae & Shingange 2024:1). Although Mothoagae and Shingange use 'the wretched' from the perspective of Frantz Fanon, depicting how the colonialists described the Africans in agricultural terms, I use the term more broadly to capture the oppressed Africans under the rubrics of democratically illegitimate and repressive regimes. I argue that just as Africans were perceived as 'the wretched' by the colonialists, so do the 'blasphemous' regimes deal with the masses as 'the wretched'. After all, 'where there is illegitimacy in political authority or the disorder or coerced order, or injustice of any degree afflicted upon anyone, there is blasphemy' (Stringfellow 1977:39) and 'idolatrous political theology' (Munro 1990:161). I agree with Stringfellow that illegitimate, corrupt, unjust, repressive, irresponsible and unaccountable regimes represent a sacrilege and blasphemy. It is on this basis that I examine the text in contemporary African politics.

The prompt: An unrehearsed drama

After the 2023 general elections, nationally and internationally described as the worst in the history of elections in Nigeria, a little drama took place in a Pentecostal church in Nigeria during the prayer session of the service. The person leading the prayer had requested the congregation to 'pray for the new government … pray for mercy for the just elected leaders', so that 'there will be peace and development in the nation'. He added that 'God commands Christians to obey the government because He (God) established it no matter what we hear in the newspapers', quoting from both 1 Timothy 2:1 and Romans 13:1–2. The unrehearsed swing towards praying 'for justice in the land' instead of 'praying for' the regime, and the quietness or instantaneous fatigue by some members of the congregation literally discomfited the prayer leader, who instantly shouted 'Amen!' to end the prayer. He quickly proceeded to other prayer points to save the church from a potential embarrassment.

This scenario resulted in expanding the scope of an ongoing research (2021–2024): 'The Politics and Poetics of Violent Prayer in Nigerian Pentecostal Churches', which received a generous grant from the Templeton Religion Trust and was sponsored by the Calvin University Nagel Institute in the United States. The research project was interested in what the Pentecostal prayer litigants mean and what they do when they pray violently. To be clear, violent prayer is an embodied prayer that is geared towards disrupting and disestablishing a regime, more often than not a spiritual regime, which the litigants believe is responsible for their existential problems. The litigants embark on this spiritually energised and militarised prayer to overthrow evil forces in an apocalyptic sense and replace them with God's ordained rule, which they believe will make them live a flourishing life (Adelakun 2023). By engaging in violent prayer, the prayer litigants invoke the concept of 'divine violence' (Zizek 2008) – a belief that victims of violent prayer are neither accepted as a sacrifice to God nor are the prayer litigants held responsible for causing their death (Igboin 2024).

This article benefits from the ethnographic data generated from the field on the questions: 'Do Christians have to always 'pray for' illegitimate and bad government' and 'Does God establish an oppressive government?' I interviewed five persons in three Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, and one person from Zimbabwe via telephone, who consented to the interview and its contents. I content analysed their responses. In order to conceal their identities, I use pseudonyms to express their opinions in this article. I adopted this method because it is a logical outworking of social inquiry among people whose views have been neglected for long. As Ward (2022) explains:

> What qualitative research brings to contextual theology is a disciplined and structured approach to hearing the voices of individuals and communities who have often been overlooked, which has been one of the most closely held values of contextual theology from its outset. (p. 9)

I foreground the ethnographic data with robust literature to engage the raging controversies surrounding the interpretations and political applications of Romans 13: 1–7 across Africa and conclude that a contextual theological approach to interpreting and applying the text is logical in order to distinguish between good and bad regimes, and keep God's integrity.

Engaging Romans 13: 1–7 in African context

Romans 13:1–7 is a controversial text in interpretation and application in a political context. It is more complicated when juxtaposed with its deployment in both theological and political contexts in Africa that is bedevilled by oppressive regimes, whether military or democratic. The controversy mainly surrounds the appeal to absolute submission to any regime on the claim that it is established by God. Disobedience to a regime's order or policy, even when it does not favour the citizens, is presumed to be disobedience to God. The text is thus used to impose divine legitimacy on a bad regime whose source of power is nothing but democratic. The point being made is that in the tortuous history of military and democratic regimes in Africa, the majority of the regimes seek legitimacy through *force majeure*. As such regimes lack legitimacy, Romans 13:1–7 usually becomes handy for many government officials and theologians alike to force legitimacy on it and the people. Let us imagine, for instance, a president who claims to have graduated from a school that is non-existent or a governor who came in a distant fourth in an election, and the highest court of the land declares them winners by ignoring glaring facts and invoking legal technicalities to suppress the evidence. How do we associate God with violent elections and coups that result in the killing of innocent citizens by desperate politicians? How will God validate elections characterised by buying votes, rigging and bribing of the electoral body to declare losers as the winners? We may even ask: which of the political parties does God belong to when all of them publicly appear to belong to God by ostensibly quoting from the Bible and praying, like prophets, for the campaigners? If Romans 13:1–7 is used to legitimise an illegitimate regime, does it not suggest that God supported the illegitimate processes that brought the government to power *ab initio*? In a democracy where citizens belong to different political parties as in the scenario narrated in the prompt above, how should we apply Romans 13:1–7? (Igboin 2023b).

For instance, on 22 April 1990, a failed coup took place in Nigeria that was announced in the early hours of that Sunday. The Sunday service was about to commence when people in the community were jubilating that the incumbent military regime had just been overthrown overnight. The catechist did not hide his joy as he commenced the service, and prayed that the new regime (though it was eventually aborted) would be better and more favourable to the people. However, the catechist never stopped to privately criticise the regime for which he had led the congregation to pray for in the church. He, too, was facing the same existential challenges that other people were faced with. When General Sani

Abacha, who led the bloodiest military regime that Nigeria ever had in history, took over power, the catechist still prayed for him and exhorted the congregation to obey the regime. However, it is still widely claimed today that General Abacha's sudden death in June 1998 was a divine response to prayer: many Christians and Muslims claimed that they 'prayed against' him (Onimhawo & Igboin 2008).

The formation of pressure groups and social activism whose membership extended to all religious traditions shows that a bad regime must not be obeyed, let alone left to continue in power. The active involvement of mainline churches' leadership such as Primate Abiodun Adetiloye of the Anglican Communion among others cannot be over-emphasised in forging a balanced interpretation and political application of the text (Onimhawo & Igboin 2008). 'Praying against' is a social-spiritual activism that uses prayer to disentangle or upset a bad regime. Its spiritual basis stems from the widespread belief that the spirit rules the physical, and as a result when a force is dislodged in the spiritual realm, it will manifest in the physical. Ademiluka (2019) points out that Christian social activism is contentious. Christian social activism relates to how Christians are involved in organising and mobilising the people to challenge the policies of an incumbent regime. The Save Nigerian Group (SNG) led by the radical Pentecostal pastor Tunde Bakare in 2012 resulted in the reversal of the increase in the price of petroleum products in Nigeria. In January 2012, President Goodluck Jonathan announced the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. The implication was that the prices of petroleum products would rise astronomically. The SNG organised a nation-wide protest, which forced the government to revert the policy. Furthermore, the incessant killings of Christians and the apparent non-action of the government to stem the tide also triggered Christian social activism, where Christians marched round cities on a Sunday in what they called a 'prayer walk'. The prayer walk was to register their displeasure over the insecurity that had engulfed the country and the abductions and murder of Christians. Expectedly, Christians were divided over the action: some argued that the Bible enjoins them to be submissive to any regime, while those who participated maintained that government's disquiet over security challenges should be pointed out to awaken it to its responsibility towards the welfare and security of the people. 'Christians should understand that they have the responsibility to cooperate with the legally constituted human governments on the efforts at promoting peace and harmony in their societies' (Akintola 2019:107). However, Samuel Akintola misses the point when he supposes that every government in power is legitimate, and thus should be obeyed.

In Zimbabwe, Chamburuka (2012) and Gusha (2020) examine how Romans 13:1–7 has been interpreted and applied. Chamburuka notes that 'court prophets' described Robert Mugabe as a 'divinely given [president] and that he should not be opposed' in spite of the fact that he 'politically suffocated' the entire country with the active support of many Christians (Chamburuka 2012:207). He posits that apart from the early years of the regime, which could be thought of as a relief after the war of liberation, over 27 years of Mugabe's rule were years of the locusts. Zimbabwe became a policed state where oppositions were hounded to death or exile. The brutality and corruption of the regime could not engender much development. The sit-tight syndrome through the deployment of the military ensured that there was no regime change until 2017 when he was toppled. In the heat of the regime, Chamburuka argues that the text was used to quarantine the church to steer clear from politics when it wanted to intervene. This position emphasised a separation between church and state. As Chamburuka noted, the fierce battle of the opposition led to a change of interpretation and contextualisation of the text among those who had earlier supported the application of the text. Accordingly:

> [*M*]ost of them appraised the GNU [Government of National Unity] as the will of God as well as the people of Zimbabwe, a total departure from the campaigning slogan flavored by Romans 13:1–7. (Chamburuka 2012:202)

Gusha (2020) adds that although the Zimbabwean First Republic, headed by Mugabe, was oppressive, the Second Republic, led by Mugabe's strong ally for over 37 years, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, appears to be more vicious.

According to Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2012), as the electorates participate in democracy by voting a government into power, it is incumbent on the citizens to obey the government as the text prescribes. He argues that all governments and rulers function under delegated power from God. 'Thus, they rule on behalf of God, and as such ought to rule as God would – with love, passion and compassion' (Kuwornu-Adjaottor 2012:489). Kuwornu-Adjaottor's interpretation seems to follow Cassidy's (2010:387) position that Paul continued with the Old Testament tradition of God putting and removing rulers from positions. What Christians ought to do, Cassidy (2010:388) admonishes, is to live peaceably with one another first of all (Rm 12:18), and then extend it to those outside the church as part of their civil responsibility (Rm 13:7). However, Bawks (2019:1) submits that 'not all governments support God's will … An important clarification is that governments only hold divine validity and God's sanction to the extent that they align with God's laws'. It can, therefore, be deduced that submission to government, particularly a bad one, is not an absolute command even though the government is ultimately submitted to God's rule. If there are clear reasons to challenge and resist government, Christians have no option other than to engage in resistance. As Cullman (1957) reminds us:

> As soon as Christians, out of loyalty to the gospel of Jesus, offer resistance to a State's totalitarian claim, the representatives of the State or their collaborationist theological advisers are accustomed to appeal to this saying of Paul, as if Christians are here commended to endorse and thus to abet all the crimes of a totalitarian State. (p. 56)

Mukuka (2012) takes an ambivalent view of the text, which puts the foregoing paragraphs in tension. Taking a post-colonial posture, Mukuka argues that regimes should be praised if and when they do well and criticised if otherwise. But those who praise or criticise regimes have to be sure that their action has a transformative result as Romans 12:1–2 demands. However, Lategan (2012) maintains that it is hardly possible to interpret the text ambivalently, particularly when read within a specific context. His empirical approach to the text shows that there is bound to be 'affirmative' and 'resistant' perspectives, especially when read intertextually with Romans 12 and Revelation 13. While these are legitimate interpretations, I understand the text from its post-colonial application by different regimes in Africa. In other words, whether or not the text is subversive or supportive of the Roman regime, I approach it with a tension; the tension that any African regime has something to hide from the people as in Matthew 28:11–15. The attempt to subvert the truth of the resurrection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders supports the idea that regimes can deploy conspiracies to achieve their sinister agenda. Given this, Romans 13:1–7 can be read vis-a-vis Acts 5:29, that is, at any time a regime acts contrary to God's will for humanity, such a regime can be disobeyed. Disobedience to a regime that perceives itself as a god is obedience to God.

An analysis of Romans 13:1–7

From the foregoing, it is clear that Romans 13:1–7 is a problematic text in both interpretation and application. Lim (2015:1) engages the text as a double-voiced discourse that 'conveys both the voice of assimilation and the voice of resistance in the colonial milieu' and depicts Paul as '[*k*]nowing or choosing when to affiliate and when or how to resist are part and parcel of negotiating life and power in a colonial situation'. For Lim, the text cannot completely place Paul as supporting or antagonising colonialism, which suggests that the text represents Paul's active, public voice against colonialism, which is transformed into a hidden resistant voice to emphasise the point that all forms of idolatry are evil. The double-voiced exegesis makes Paul ambivalent, and if so, leaves it to contemporary Christians as to how to engage and apply it. Now, let us engage the text (Rm 13:1–7):

> Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

Many scholars have argued about submission to regimes. But the emphasis here is the implication of the submission to regimes on the presumption that such regimes are established by God. There are philosophical and ethical issues to deal with if we agree that democracy in most parts of Africa is a product of God's will. For instance, Amnesty International (2020) reported the gory sights in the Cote d'Ivoire 2020 elections, where the police, machetes and guns were freely used against opposition members after whisking away dozens of them. In Nigeria's 2023 elections, violence marred the process, leading to the death of many people, rigging, maiming, arson and so on (Ibrahim 2023). As Ghana prepared for its elections in December 2024, the alleged increase in illegal possession of guns was alarming. Of course, these guns being stockpiled will not be used on animals but on fellow citizens (Mensah 2024). The African Union's 'Silencing the Guns' campaign that took off in 2020 is a testament to the political precarity bedevilling democracy in the continent. What is disturbing is that some of the AU leaders have unresolved political legitimacy crises back home; in fact, some of these leaders are products of guns and machetes. The most urgent question is, where are the guns coming from? (Musau 2020).

Firstly, the argument is that if these so-called democratic regimes that brutally rigged themselves into power are established by God, then it will mean that the regimes cannot be held accountable for their abuse of power and the killing of the citizens because they have God's imprimatur. That will paint a brutal picture of a loving and saving God. Why? God is omnipotent; and by this omnipotence he should have prevented an evil regime, if he is also willing to do so. But evil regimes exist, therefore, it is either God is not willing or unable to prevent an evil regime (Igboin 2022). If this philosophical argument is pursued further, it will mean that the repressive regimes do not act on their own volition; their politically repulsive actions are not a product of free will. Oladayo Bamidele (2024a, 2024b) argues that the fact that God is omnipotent does not necessarily overrule human free will; humans have to be free in their everyday choices in order for God to be able to consider the rightness or wrongness of their actions. If God's omnipotence overrules human free will, God will not be able to hold humans accountable. In the same vein, a bad regime is not a choice of its leader rather a product of God's will.

Secondly, in a multi-party democracy where a regime brutalises its way into power, it will (mis)represent God as being politically partisan and instigating violence, whereas there is the possibility that there are Christians across all the parties. This does not preclude a corrupt and repressive regime that claims to be a Christian one in the case of Frederick Chiluba in Zambia (Hatchard 2020; Kaunda 2019). Thirdly, how might the text be interpreted from the opposition parties' perspectives that tend to see more clearly the ills of the government in power? Well, there might be the argument that the opposition parties are sometimes not altruistic in their civil disobedience to the government. But if it is accepted in absolute

terms that opposition parties must obey the incumbent government, then there may be no need for periodic elections. Fourthly, if the incumbent regime refuses to relinquish power after losing election because it perceives itself as established by God, the legitimate winners must do nothing about their 'stolen mandate'. Fifthly, for the repressed people, criticism of government by activists, prophets and opposition parties is good, but the incumbent regimes in their autocracy regard it as a rebellion against a divinely instituted regime. It is for this reason that many regimes arrest and incarcerate journalists and those who expose their corruption.

Sixthly, in many instances, repressive regimes are strategically engaged in conspiracy theories, which they force on the people as the truth, as Matthew 28:11–15 shows. Because such regimes have the state and compromised media on their payroll and stifle parallel media outlets, their conspiracy theories are regarded as the absolute truth. For instance, the state's position on the resurrection of Jesus was that it was the disciples that stole his body when the soldiers were sleeping. The soldiers, having collected bribes, could have co-operated with the state to spread the conspiracy theory that Jesus did not resurrect. There was confusion among the people as they struggled between the conflicting disciples' proclamation of Jesus' resurrection and the 'official' broadcast of Jesus's body being stolen. It does not matter that it was rationally deficient to imagine that the soldiers could sleep off to the point that 'common' disciples sneaked into the tomb to steal Jesus's body. The argument here is that it is not rational, ethical and safe to accept a regime's constructed conspiracy theory just because it claims to be a constituted authority. Seventhly, corrupt and repressive regimes do not commend good people; the fact is that the regimes define what is good, not in accordance with the established laws, but upon their whims and caprices. The citizens such regimes declare to be good citizens are more often than not convicted criminals whom the state grants pardon (Igboin 2023b).

Many opinions have been expressed about what might have prompted Paul to pen the text. It has been argued that the Roman government at that time was responsible to the people in terms of provision of social amenities or road infrastructures and networks, and justice, which Paul enjoyed (Ac 18:12–17; 21:27–40; 23:12–24). Consequently, Paul, having assessed and convinced that the Roman government in power was a responsible one, commended the Christians to obey it. If this is the case, it will suggest that a good and responsible government deserves obedience and support from the citizens and Christians (Chamburuka 2012). It should be noted that if Paul offers this as an ethic of governance, it does not follow that it is a charter of the Christian response to all situations. If Paul intends that it is a charter, it will mean that he supports or even legitimates dictatorial and democratically 'fraudulent' governments that have suffused Africa today. However, in an ideal democracy, the power or sword, which symbolises the force of authority, should normally and ultimately belong to the people rather than the rulers. The regimes only use the sword on behalf of the people (Iwasa 2010). No wonder, therefore, that Klaus Nürnberger claims:

> If the rulers become guilty and do not subject themselves to the scrutiny of the ruled, they forfeit the right to use the sword and *this right returns to the primary authority*. Then they, not the existing rulers, are entitled to use force to curtail evil – even the evil committed by the rulers. (Iwasa 2010:163)

In another vein, scholars think that Paul must have written the text to forewarn Christians about the consequences of disobedience to the government because of the consequences the Jews had experienced during the enactment of Claudius' Edict in AD 49 (Chamburuka 2012). History is replete with the fact that Nero wrongly accused Christians and ferociously persecuted and killed multitudes of them. Paul and Peter were allegedly martyred by Nero (Chamburuka 2012; Nwanguma 2022). In fact, the once-tolerant Roman government, 'prayed for' and obeyed turned authoritarian and brutish against the Christians such that in less than a century, Christians regarded it as a 'usurper of power' that deserved to fall (Nelson 1993:564). My argument is that the once 'prayed for' Roman government degenerated into a 'prayed against' government, which by then had lost its relationship with God. Another argument posits that Paul was inspired to point Christians' attention to the apocalyptic; hence, it will be unnecessary to focus attention on worldly things. This is hardly the thrust of the text as Paul does not treat state–church relations from an eschatological perspective (Nwanguma 2022).

What can be gleaned from the foregoing is that the text is problematic; the different interpretations suggest different things that are more often than not irreconcilable. To agree that Paul deliberately instructed Christians to blindly obey the text will mean that he supports and recommends uncritical subservience to authorities that may jeopardise, challenge or divide their obedience to God. As such, bad and irresponsible governments will continue in their oppression, which might lead to some abandoning the faith. Such regimes may even go as far as to outlaw the Christian faith in their jurisdiction. Brutal regimes usually demand blind obedience to their commands, and the text seemingly offers a 'divine' imprimatur to their whims and caprices. However, it will be more reasonable to think in a particular and contextual manner when engaging the text. By a particularist approach, I mean that regimes in Africa should be evaluated on their individual performances in relation to their campaign promises. By the contextual or 'situational' (Munro 1990:161) approach, I suggest that a particular regime should not enjoy unqualified support. This situational approach of reading the text can be observed in the recent nation-wide protests in Kenya against President Ruto's regime. It is obvious that if the Kenyan youths had literally applied the text that Ruto was put in power by God, the regime's excruciating policies would have further pauperised the already economically deprived citizens.

Romans 13: 1–7 in lived experience in Africa

I observed that most sermons of pastors of megachurches on Romans 13: 1–7 lead to one conclusion, which is that Christians should unquestionably submit to any regime. These pastors

claim that opposing regimes is unbiblical. The only exception is that when the command of a regime contravenes God's command, Christians should obey God rather than the regime, citing Acts 5:29. Adelaja (Interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, on 18 June 2023) argues that it is the court prophets that actually make the text difficult to understand. Adelaja says that 'it is our prophets that lead us. Whatever they say is what we follow because they hear from God. So, we should obey the government and our pastors'. The same view is expressed by Robert in an interview held via telephone at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria on 06 May 2024 from the Zimbabwean experience. Robert narrates how some prophets claimed that President Mnangagwa was 'a divinely ordained candidate' in 2023 Zimbabwean elections. Some of the prophets went on to declare 21 days fasting and prayer for his victory.

They claimed that Mnangagwa is less corrupt and brutal compared to Robert Mugabe:

> 'So, when you see big pastors support a particular candidate openly, it gives the impression that God is actually backing him up'. (Robert, Interview held [via telephone] at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, on 06 May 2024).

Robert, in an interview held via telephone at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria on 06 May 2024, as well as Ayoade, in an interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria on 18 June 2023, added that the media help to project the divine narratives that support Mnangagwa's presidency as well as other African democratic dictators' images. However:

> '[*W*]e cannot say that everyone who speaks in the public in support of a candidate goes to the polls to vote for that candidate. There is fear everywhere; the security forces are on a prowl against perceived and real opposition members. Because the government knows this truth, they deployed violence to win the election.' (Robert, Interview held [via telephone] at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, 06 May 2024)

This implies that pastors' interpretation of the text influences how Christians receive and apply the text in their everyday life.

On the contrary, Chika opines that he will not be subject to an illegitimate regime. According to him:

> 'We are angry. You see how the election went. So therefore, no correct Christian in this country [*Nigeria*] should obey this government … I hear that some pastors are saying we should pray for the government. To be frank with you, I cannot pray for this government. God will not answer such prayer because they rigged the elections … God is a good God. He cannot support rigging of elections. Never!' (Chika, Interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, 18 June 2023)

Chika informed me that he stopped attending church service because he did not align with how his pastor managed the church during election campaigns. According to him, the pastor was inclined to:

> '[*F*]orget to understand that there are different political parties and ethnic groups in the church.' (Chika, Interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, 18 June 2023)

Folade was very vehement:

> '[*W*]hen will they [*pastors*] start praying against evil government? We are just afraid to die; unfortunately, they killed so many people [*during the election*] to get there [*to power*].' (Folade, Interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, 18 June 2023)

Folade's response struck a punch because it reflectively espouses the attitude of most people: fear. Fear has crippled the people; and Robert said among the Zimbabwean people, they employ a double-voiced approach – speaking one thing publicly and doing the opposite privately.

In an interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria on 18 June 2023, Agbede argues for what one may refer to as spiritual disobedience in place of civil disobedience. Agbede submits that repressive regimes will not mind crushing protesters as they did in 2020 during the #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria (Igboin 2022; Lorenz 2022). Instead of open protests, Agbede suggests spiritual protests thus:

> 'This government has been asking the people to pray for them so that they can succeed. You hear the president asking us to pray for his government. The government officials send the same prayer request to the suffering masses. My opinion is that we should ignore their prayer request and pray our own prayer.' (Agbede, Interview held at Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria, 18 June 2023)

Praying 'our own prayer' obviously means preference for spiritual disobedience to a civil disobedience. In other words, as most Christians consider civil disobedience as confrontational (Ademiluka 2019), which is often meant with military repression, spiritual disobedience becomes a potent appropriation of the text. This is borne out of the strong and pervasive belief that prayer against a regime can result in an abrupt change in the polity (Onimhawo & Igboin 2008).

Conclusion

Romans 13: 1–7 is historically and contextually controversial because it addresses a fundamental political reality that cannot be readily replicated in contemporary Africa. The inveterately repressive and corrupt regimes that spread in the name of democracy in Africa, and the incessant demand on the enervated masses to continue to obey them, raise the question of whether obedience to a regime should be without some rational and ethical qualifications. I argue that in appropriating the text, a particularist and contextual approach should be adopted; that is, each regime should be objectively evaluated in its own right. One way of such evaluation is to weigh their performances against their electoral promises. After all, African regimes often claim that their popularity and electoral victory result from their manifestos. With the social media, it is now becoming increasingly difficult to effectively deny campaign promises. Only such regimes that live up to their responsibility should be obeyed. Thus, I argue that 'praying for' a repressive regime is obedience to such a regime; thus, spiritual disobedience, that is, 'praying against', should be the first step towards appropriating the text in contemporary African politics. An unjust regime is a blasphemous regime, which does

not deserve to be obeyed; it should be prayed against as a demonstration of spiritual disobedience by the wretched.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

B.O.I. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from Centre for Research and Development Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria, Human Research Ethics Committee with ethical approval number 230321ERC1.

Funding information

This research received grant from the Nagel Institute, Calvin University, USA with Grant Number EAR600.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author(s) are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Adelakun, A.A., 2023, *Powerful devices: Prayer and the political praxis of spiritual warfare*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.

Ademiluka, S.O., 2019, 'Romans 13:1–7 in relation to Nigerian Christians' attitudes towards social activism', *In die Skriflig* 53(1), a2467. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i1.2467

Akintola, S.O., 2019, 'Obedience to civil authorities in Romans 13:1–7 as a Panacea for good governance in Nigeria', *Light in a Once-Dark World* 1, 84–107.

Amnesty International, 2020, *Côte d'Ivoire: The use of machetes and guns reveals horrors of post-election violence*, viewed 04 May 2024, from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/cote-divoire-use-of-machetes-and-guns-reveals-horrors/.

Bamidele, O.O., 2024a, 'Freewill, determinism and corruption in Nigeria', in B.O. Igboin (ed.), *Religion and everyday life in Nigeria: A Festschrift for Professor Olu E. Alana*, pp. 33–54, Galda Verlag, Glienicke.

Bamidele, O.O., 2024b, 'God's omnipotence and the problem of corruption in Nigeria', in B.O. Igboin (ed.), *Philosophy, religion, and social issues in Nigeria: A Festschrift for Professor (Monsignor) John A. Onimhawo*, pp. 101–124, Galda Verlag, Glienicke.

Bawks, D., 2019, 'Resisting authority in the twenty-first century Kenya: An analysis and application of Romans 13:1–7', in D.K. Ngaruiya & R.L. Reed (eds.), *Governance and Christina higher education in African context*, pp. 1–23, Langham, Cumbria.

Bergmann, N.W., 2013, 'Ecological appropriation of Joel', *Australian eJournal of Theology* 20(1), 34–48.

Cassidy, R., 2010, 'The politicization of Paul: Romans 13:1–7 in recent discussion', *The Expository Times* 121(8), 377–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610364453

Chamburuka, P.M., 2012, 'A theological reflection on Romans 13:1–17 in the 21st century Zimbabwean politics', in M.A. Gunda & J. Kugler (eds.), *Bible and politics in Africa*, pp. 191–211, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.

Cullman, O., 1957, *The state in the New Testament*, SCM, London.

Gusha, I.S., 2020, 'Exegesis of Romans 13:1–7 and its appropriation to the new dispensation of the Second Republic of Zimbabwe', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6041. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6041

Hatchard, J., 2020, *Combating money laundering in Africa: Dealing with the problem of PEPs,* Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.

Ibrahim, J., 2023, *Elections with guns: Reversing judiciary-induced democratic regression*, viewed 04 May 2024, from https://dailytrust.com/elections-with-guns-reversing-judiciary-induced-democratic-regression/.

Igboin, B.O., 2022, 'Corruption and state fragility in Nigeria: The rise of #EndSARS as a contrastive leadership', in C. Jones, P. Pillay, P.S. Reddy & S. Zondi (eds.), *Lessons from political leadership in Africa: Towards inspirational and transformational leaders*, pp. 189–212, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle.

Igboin, B.O., 2023a, 'Contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation as schemes of power relations', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7645

Igboin, B.O., 2023b, 'An Afro-Christian contextual analysis of presidential pardon in post-colonial African politics', *Acta Theologica* Supp 36, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.38140/at.vi.7027

Igboin, B.O., 2024, '"Violent times call for violent prayers": "Divine Violence" during the COVID-19 pandemic in the mountain of fire and miracles ministries, Nigeria', *Religions* 57(471), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040471

Iwasa, N., 2010, 'Dual ethics in Romans 13', *Journal of Dharma* 35(2), 159–169.

Kaunda, C.J., 2019, *The Nation that fears God prospers: A critique of Zambian Pentecostal theopolitical imaginations*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Kuwornu-Adjaottor, J.E.T., 2012, '"Be Subject to the Governing Authorities": A Ghanaian Christian Understanding of Romans 13:1', *Journal of Emerging Trends in Economics and Management Sciences* 3(5), 485–490.

Lategan, B., 2012, 'Romans 13:1–7: A review of past-1989 readings', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 110(1), 259–272. https://doi.org/10.7833/110-0-115

Lim, S.U., 2015, 'A double voiced reading of Romans 13:1–7 in light of the imperial cult', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(1), 2475. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2475

Lorenz, T., 2022, *Soro soke: The young disruptors of an African megacity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mensah, K., 2024, *Surge in small arms threatens 2024 elections*, viewed 04 May 2024, from https://www.theafricareport.com/333402/ghana-surge-in-small-arms-threatens-2024-elections/.

Mothoagae, I.D. & Shingange, T., 2024, 'The 19th-century missionary literature: Biculturality and bi-religiosity, a reflection from the perspective of the wretched', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9032. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9032

Mukuka, T., 2012, 'Reading / hearing Romans 13:1–7 under an African tree: Towards a Lectio Postcolonica Contexta Africana', *Neotestamentica* 46(1), 106–138.

Munro, W., 1990, 'Romans 13:1–7 Apartheid's Last Biblical Refuge', *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 20(4), 161–168. https://doi.org/10.1177/014610799002000405

Musau, Z., 2020, *Silencing the guns in Africa by 2020*, viewed 04 May 2024, from https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2019-march-2020/silencing-guns-africa-2020.

Nelson, T., 1993, *The word in life study bible: Discover the truths of god's word for you and your world*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN.

Nwanguma, C.I., 2022, 'A study of Romans 13:1–7 in the context of Nigerian polity', *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 8(8), 216–228. https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022882

Onimhawo, J.A. & Igboin, B.O., 2008, *ONANISM: A moral evaluation of political power retention in Nigeria*, Monograph series 1, Blessed Publishers, Ekpoma.

Stringfellow, W., 1977, *Conscience and obedience: The politics of Romans 13 and Revelations 13 in light of the Second Coming*, Word Books, Waco.

Ward, P., 2022, 'Theology and qualitative research: An uneasy relationship', in P. Ward & K. Tveitereid (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to theology and qualitative research*, pp. 7–16, Wiley, New York, NY.

Zizek, S., 2008, *Violence: Six sideways reflections*, Big Ideas/Small Books, New York, NY.