

God's Diplomats. How Pentecostal Mega-Church Pastors are Transforming African Foreign Policymaking

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ABSTRACT: Last decade brought further increase in popularity and outreach of Pentecostal pastors-evangelists and the expansion of new mega-churches in Sub-Saharan Africa. Media savvy and marketing-skilled charismatic “holy men” perform multiple functions, including that of political actors, increasingly influential, and indispensable in the election cycles of multiple African states, most notably Anglophone ones. Recognising the pivotal role of Pentecostal constituencies, political players, such as candidates in presidential elections seek mega-church leaders’ blessings or a favourable political prophecy. State officials reciprocate with adopting policies which resonate with their message. This mutual relationship and mainstreaming of Pentecostal discourse affects the overall political culture of young, African democracies. As the new brand of Pentecostalism grows on economic deprivation and disillusionment with the state, it also begins to foster, not just metaphorically, an alternative order and set of values. This comes with religiously driven perceptions of pastors’ powers, which makes them seem potentially more effective and legitimate than secular, democratic leaders, and state institutions. Thanks to those credentials, as well as their widely developed networks, influential pastors begin to make inroads into African foreign policymaking. The process of officialising Pentecostal actors as quasi-diplomats as well as absorbing their ideas and modus operandi into the foreign policy arena seem to contradict advancement of professionalism and transparency in diplomacy as functions of state capabilities. However, in some contexts, growth of their powers and outreach may work in favour of increasing African agency.

KEYWORDS: Africa, pastors, Pentecostalism, mega-churches, political

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Introduction

■ **By the end of 2017, reports of horrors undergone by African migrants illegally detained in slavery-like conditions in Libya shook the foundations of the European policy debate about partnering with third states on controlling migrations¹. It also forwarded questions of how and who may be capable of making a change in lawless, violent settings, such as Libya's of the time, where militias run stronger than the state (*EU, African leaders...*, 2017). Half a year later, a group of Nigerian migrants detained in Al Nasr facility in Zaouïa found themselves in need of resolving the same dilemma. In July 2018, despite great risks, they managed to record a plea for help, which went viral on WhatsApp (*Vidéo: des migrants...*, 2018). 31 inmates agreed to be filmed in a desperate move to attract the world's attention. Most of them had their faces covered, except for Efe Onyeka and Frank Isaiah who acted like spokesmen for the group. They described the terrible conditions they were being held in, risks of dying, and begged for rescue. Surprisingly, they didn't use the 3 minutes available to seek assistance from the most obvious partners in evacuations: Libyan government, International Organization for Migration (IOM), European Union, African Union, President of the U.S., or the United Nations Secretary General. Instead, they appealed to famous Pentecostal pastors: Enoch Adeboye, David Oyedepo, Apostle Johnson Suleiman, and T.B. Joshua hoping for their intervention. At one point they added the Nigerian government to the list, but more as a secondary supplement to the line of cherished evangelical leaders than as prime targets of their plea. Apparently, they considered the influential pastors as more powerful and potentially capable of bringing them home than any recognised state or international structure.**

This illustrated an important shift in the evolution of the popular imagination about the state and religious orders in Africa. It signaled that the Pentecostal leaders grew to be perceived as performing

greater agency in strictly political and administrative matters, ones that ought to be reserved for states. This must have partially resulted from the appreciation of their proven skills in management of the growing, devoted congregations, but also from their perceived seniority in interactions with politicians and from their records as political actors on their own.

The growing weight of Pentecostals in African politics

The Pentecostal movement, a fast-growing brand of charismatic Christianity which resonates heavily in Africa, is most often being analysed from the doctrinal, evangelic perspective. As thousands of new congregations are being established, without any overriding central structure (except loose umbrella organisations), it's not easy to grasp common features applicable to all, or most of them. They are certainly built around the type of participation that makes service attendance an intense, personal experience. Believers attribute this almost tangible connection to the *spiritual* involving speaking in tongues, exorcisms, trance, and miracles, to the presence and interventions of the Holy Spirit. On the side of leaders, communities are built around their charisma. Pastors declare themselves to be answering God's call to become a preacher, or – increasingly often – a prophet. In this way members of their congregation see them as “anointed”. Some major trends in the movement's historic evolution can be identified, though. For the purposes of this study, which focuses on political aspects of Pentecostalism, a typology proposed by Zambian Pentecostal writer Dr. Elias Munshya would be applicable: 1) Classical Pentecostals who are “very evangelical in doctrine, traditional in outlook, and emphasize theological education”, with “centralised leadership structure”; 2) *Word of faith* movement “following in the paths of American teachers such as Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland”, who “emphasize some form of a *prosperity gospel*”; 3) Charismatic groups which „essentially broke away from mainline denominations” to „combine classical

¹ A CNN report *People for sale: Where lives are auctioned for \$400* by N. Elbagir R. Razek, A. Platt A. and B. Jones aired on 14.11.2017, reset the debate in the run-up to the EU-Africa summit scheduled to take place in Abidjan two weeks later. It resulted in the EU putting on hold discussions about externalising responsibility for migrants to southern Mediterranean states and focusing on crafting emergency mechanisms to enable evacuations of those detained in Libyan formal and unofficial prisons.

Pentecostalism, the word-of-faith, and the traditions of their parent denominations". 4) Newer, independent, and syncretic churches with „strong emphasis on “prophetism” who “use Pentecostal language but function like seers and witchdoctors”. In this sense – despite rejecting elements of “pagan” tradition – they are the closest to “African traditional religious worldview”. Their leaders “foretell their followers’ fortunes and perform miracles” (Munshya, 2015; Munshya, 2020).

This typology, despite being imperfect and rooted in Zambian locality, is helpful in capturing and contextualising ecclesiastic roots and socio-cultural functions of newly emerging prophetic churches found across Africa. This article focuses on pastors combining elements of the second and the fourth category, thus prosperity-preaching *prophets*, who are also typically successful entrepreneurs, which helps in perceiving them as a more or less coherent cohort. If their link to tradition helps, it is not just their spiritual credentials that boosts their appeal, making them arguably the fastest growing branch of Christianity, and – if this trend continues – one dominating Africa’s religious sphere in the future. Much of it is due to style of leadership, management, and promotion, as church leaders are typically “upwardly mobile and educated professionals, who appropriate modern mass media technologies and marketing techniques to market their ministries” (Parsitau & Mwaura, 2010, p. 16). Most of them skilfully run multiple social media channels while churches founded by Temitope Balogun Joshua (T.B. Joshua), David Oyedepo, Enoch Adeboye, Sam Adeyemi, Chris Oyakhilome and others also secured broadcasting via their own satellite or cable channels (*Prophet Bushiri...*, 2020). Church leaders discussed in this article are typically successful businessmen with wide portfolios ranging from hoteling to real estate, banking and the sale of holy water. Emphasis on service attractiveness, crucial amidst growing competition for souls, steers them towards performing their sermons like spectacles, often in mega-churches resembling those of American tele-evangelists. In their look, however, African pastors² differ from their conservative, US predecessors. They prefer a super-glamorous style, which resembles that of the Congolese dandies, the *sapeurs*, with their extravagant, shiny suits and gold fashion accessories. Super-rich attire of leaders such as Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, or Apostle Johnson

Suleman, head of Omega Fire Ministries International, proves their star status but also serves as confirmation of the *prosperity gospel*: service to God is being rewarded with material wealth. As in Latin America and parts of the Pacific Rim, promises (or illusions) of success available through devotion became an important magnet of the Pentecostal churches in Africa, alongside spiritual experience. This material aspect is reflected in their names, such as David Oyedepo’s Winners Chapel. This, in turn, made becoming a pastor a desired path of elevating oneself on the social ladder synonymous with a successful career. Zimbabwe-born Uebert Angel’s (head of the GoodNews Church ministry) 2022 book “The Effective Soul Winner. Everything you need to know about communicating God’s love and leading souls to Christ” can serve as a business-plan template for aspiring “prophets”³. It is modelled on popular books revealing get-rich-quick schemes, which are popular in makeshift bookstores across Africa. Not coincidentally, apart from preaching, he also teaches in his Millionaire Academy (*Uebert Angel...*, 2017) offering glimmers of hope that everyone can become rich and successful. Often growth of new churches is driven by similar frustrations and aspirations – in Zimbabwe the period of rapid growth of Emmanuel Makandwiwa’s United Family Interdenominational Church (UFIC) or Walter Magaya’s Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PHD Ministries) corresponded with the severe economic crisis of the early 2010s (Brute, 2018, p. 2). In this context of ever greater demand, more pastors of dubious credentials emerged in recent years, and on average their theological qualities decreased. Emphasis on status (e.g., by adopting bombastic titles such as Bishop, Prophet, Apostille, Ambassador) and church leaders’ exceptional powers grew, which is an emblematic transgression from Pentecostalism’s roots as an egalitarian faith of the poor.

Pastors’ engagement in political conversations steadily grew. However – as Obadare argues in the case of Nigeria – they hardly challenged the political systems (Obadare, 2018, p. 4), mostly serving as its stabilisers by offering spiritual layover used to boost authorities’ legitimacy. Appetite for answering political questions was largely channelled by the faithful seeking and pastors offering spiritual explanations to ongoing political processes (Obadare, 2018, p. 1). *Political prophesies* became a major phenomenon deriving from

² T.B. Joshua, preferring regular attire, stood as a notable exception.

³ The book is available on his official website: <https://www.uebertangel.org/product/the-effective-soul-winner/>.

and animating the rise of African Pentecostalism in young multi-party electoral systems, becoming the movement's emblematic feature. Proclamations of this kind were first attributed to Nigerian pastor Tundu Bakare who is believed to have prophesied about the annulment of elections in 1993, the fall of gen. Babangida later that year, and the death of gen. Abacha in 1998 (Agbenson, 2014, p. 330–332) that accompanied the turbulent birth of Nigerian democracy. Their use became an indispensable element of the political game not only in Nigeria, but also beyond – in countries like Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, and others (Ikem Afamefune, Ogbonna Confidence & Nwoke Cordelia, 2019, p. 17–18). Famous pastors like Enoch Adeboye or the late T.B. Joshua used to unveil prophecies about both domestic (Nigerian) and global affairs. For example, on January 1, 2020 Adeboye foretold that the coming year will be marked by earthquakes as well as “changes in government”: some peaceful and some turbulent (*Pastor E.A Adeboye...*, 2020) while four days later, during his annual new year sermon, T.B. Joshua prophesied about exerting pressure on the Vice President, that “something will surface” about Vladimir Putin's health, and that dramatic events were to take place in Iran (*Prophecy for 2020!!!...*, 2020). Those were hardly spontaneous as both had them written down and prepared to be presented to congregations. Both were also similarly opaque and open to future reinterpretation, making them adjustable to the current global events unfolding at the time. As Douglas Johnson and David Anderson concluded in their analysis of the institution of prophecy (starting from pre-Judaic, Judaic, Greek, and early Christian times), future refining of the original prophecies and a dialogue between the prophet and the audiences to clarify and supplement the given message has always been part – or even the essence – of the prophetic tradition (Johnson & Anderson, 1995, p. 16, 18, 20). In the Internet age, this space for manoeuvring is now narrower for contemporary Pentecostal pastors and their political prophecies, as everything stays on the record. It is not uncommon that prophets (unsuccessfully) attempt to delete their missed predictions from the web⁴. For this reason, they often prefer to formulate their declarations in a way that keeps them open to interpretations. Uebert Angel diverted from this model and pushed political prophecies to the extreme, making

a trademark of quick and direct predictions, such as the one on Kenya's elections in 2022: “There was a time for Uhuru, then there is a time for Ruto (...), God said it's the time for Ruto”. Such a statement, if proved to be correct, is being put together with other remarks on the topic and with subsequent news report (here: Ruto's victory), squeezed into a 1-minute, heavily edited conspicuous clip with dramatic music and posted on his social media (*International Prophecy Fulfilled...*, 2022). This and other videos of the kind, structured in a prophecy/fulfilment order are being appreciated by spectators and online commentators as hard evidence of Angel's prophetic qualities. One commentator of the Kenyan elections video called him “the sharpest prophet of our time”. Another, owner of a YouTube channel devoted to Uebert wrote in August 2022: “More than 100 prophecies fulfilled since January. This man is in his own league. He clearly started this thing; he wrote the syllabus. Everything he says comes to [reality]!” (*Up To Date...*, 2022).

The more affluent and powerful pastors and churches are, the bigger the audiences they gather and the more independent they become when talking politics. As a result, they increasingly become political actors on their own. This turned pastors and their churches into political forces to be reckoned with, whose support is not to be taken for granted, but which needs to be won, which often entails making concessions to them. This represents the greatest leverage they have on the political systems in which they operate. However, it's up to debate and case-to-case analysis to assess the degree to which they are being clients or patrons in this relationship. Certainly, the influence pastors have on their congregations turned them into powerful vote-brokers, and the Pentecostal churches into vehicles of political influence. Therefore, it lays in the best interest of members of the political elites to court them for electoral advantage. Since the 2000s every election in Nigeria or Ghana has seen political rivals struggling to win favour of influential Pentecostal leaders and networks or had Pentecostals contesting for key positions. If by the end of the 2000s it was generally assumed, e.g. by Gifford, that interactions between the political and pastoral games didn't challenge the frames or alter outcomes of the former (Gifford, 2009, p. 250), subsequent years brought numerous examples, when a Pentecostal ticket proved critical

⁴ For example, T.B. Joshua on 9 November 2016 deleted his earlier prediction that Hilary Clinton wins presidential elections in the U.S.

in making a difference. Cases span from 2017 Liberia when a blessing on Emmanuel TV⁵ set George Weah on a clear path to beat Joseph Boakai in presidential elections, to Kenya in 2022 when William Ruto, more successful in proving his religious credentials than Raila Odinga in elections where ethnic loyalties mattered less than in the past (Egbejule, 2022).

However, there is also a visible trend when Pentecostal-political partnerships go beyond the folklore of electoral cycles and when Pentecostal or pastors' agendas become officialised and absorbed into state policies. Kenya's Ruto was happy to adopt a Pentecostal churches' coalition's demands as state program, even if it went against the principle of its secular nature (Hochet-Bodin, 2022), and Zimbabwe's Minister of Tourism Walter Mzembe absorbed prospects of development of religious tourism into the government's agenda (Brute, 2018, p. 2). He argued, ever since, that it was worth to recalibrate the country's hospitality industry into serving visitors to megachurches like Emmanuel Makandiwa's United Family Interdenominational Church (UFIC) or Walter Magaya's Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PHD Ministries), who grew into global prominence (*Religious Tourism...*, 2014).

When aura of those interactions takes roots, they transform the countries' political cultures, their *ways of doing* politics not only in domestic, but also broader – regional and international contexts. In such cases we are edging closer to seeing glimpses of an alternative order, or philosophy, imposing itself on the state and Pentecostalisating its approach to foreign policymaking.

Towards Pentecostalisation of foreign policymaking. A step backwards and a step forward

While in the Libya case pastors didn't manage to meet expectations of the Zaouia prisoners (it was the IOM who repatriated detainees), they could have been credited with some successes as envoys invited by foreign leaders to intervene in their domestic political crises. In November 2015 T.B. Joshua was invited by the Tanzanian president-elect John Pombe Magufuli – his long-time friend and attendee of SCOAN's sermons – to his inauguration.

Pastor's arrival in Dar Es Salaam overshadowed visits of invited African heads of state. The visit quickly evolved into a diplomatic mission: Joshua met all the key stakeholders – Magufuli, his electoral rival Edward Lowassa (also familiar to SCOAN), the outgoing president Jakaya Kikwete and a line of opposition figures (Fatunmole, 2021). This helped to ease the post-electoral tension and, critically, persuaded Lowassa to accept defeat and endorse Magufuli as the new leader. While it is not possible to assess retrospectively how big the risk of post-electoral violence was (it's atypical to Tanzania's political culture), the regional context – especially the memory of deadly clashes in Kenya in 2007 – raised the stakes and turned Joshua's mediation into a meaningful diplomatic intervention of a sole, V.I.P. political actor, made possible by his connections across the political spectrum.

In 2019 South Sudanese president Salva Kiir invited T.B. Joshua to lead a prophetic sermon at the State House in the country's capital, Juba. This was to help – like in Tanzania – the parties to the 2018 Khartoum agreement ending South Sudan's civil war in overcoming their differences. The Nigerian cleric first became known in South Sudan when on 27 October 2013 he told his congregation of his vision of a “country very close to Kenya, [where] many will be displaced and thousands more killed as some people try to capture the leader” (*South Sudan appoints...*, 2014). It was later reinterpreted as foreseeing a power struggle that resulted in the eruption of South Sudan's devastating and extremely brutal civil war in December that year. Shortly after, Kiir, who fought his ex-deputy Riek Machar and invited Ugandan forces to assist him militarily, sent his new deputy James Wani Igga to SCOAN to offer T.B. Joshua a position of government advisor on religious affairs. Kiir hoped the prophet's authority would help him in advancing his narrative that the war started with a coup attempt against him. However, less than a month later, South Sudan's special court, despite pressure, dismissed the “coup” version due to lack of evidence and freed suspects – Kiir critics (Aleu, 2014). Still, Joshua's aura could have served Kiir as a counterweight to prophetic credentials of Machar, who was seen by his supporters as the one foreseen by precolonial Nuer prophet Ngundeng as the future leader. The period around South Sudan's

⁵ Sermon-airing Emmanuel TV was founded in 2006 by T.B. Joshua as a media arm of his Synagogue, Church of All Nations, following a state ban from Nigerian TV of controversial Christian programs claiming to be airing miracles. It set an example for other megachurches which followed suit with setting up their own broadcasters. In Liberia it was available on a popular DTV (Multichoice) satellite platform and by 2017 was among the most viewed (and fastest growing) in Africa.

independence (2011), when history was in the making, was marked with a rapid rise in interest in predictions proclaimed in the late XIXth and early XXth centuries by this iconic traditional figure (Czerep, 2013, p. 132–136). South Sudanese, vividly deciphering and reinterpreting hidden meanings of Ngundeng’s century-old poems, were therefore no strangers to the practice of *political prophecies*. Indeed, they were probably more culturally accustomed to it than anyone else. In this context Kiir finally secured T.B. Joshua’s arrival in the country in November 2019⁶, when difficult talks with Machar on implementing the peace agreement and forming a post-war unity government continued without a breakthrough. The problem was lack of trust between the parties. Tensions continued and even dramatic interventions by Pope Francis’, who on 11 April 2019 kissed feet of both conflicted leaders (*Pope Kisses Feet...*, 2019), couldn’t have broken the ice between the two recent belligerents. Upon T.B. Joshua’s arrival, during his sermon at the State House on 12 November, wildly celebrated and live-transmitted on state’s SSTV, the Nigerian Pentecostal stressed that “the issue of this nation is spiritual” therefore there was a need to “tackle it spiritually”. He called on stakeholders to work for peace and reminded: “This is the message God asked me to deliver. If I am a prophet, this will not go without fulfilment” (*Prophecy for South Sudan...*, 2019). That added the anticipated and expected prophetic layer to the call. President Kiir again “officialised” T.B. Joshua’s intervention by later formally crediting him with the conclusion of a peace agreement (the unity government was formed in February 2020). In a formal letter to the SCOAN leader, South Sudanese president valued his assistance more than that of the international community: “The world organization tried to negotiate peace but where human wisdom failed, God has the final answer” and pointed to fulfilment of Joshua’s November prophecy of a “new beginning” (*Letter of the President of South Sudan...*, 2020). The letter was to be proudly presented on Emmanuel TV (*South Sudan President...*, 2020).

It’s hard not to notice that both in 2014 and in 2019, South Sudanese leader attempted to present the famous Nigerian pastor as a pivotal political actor despite little proof of his actual input to the ground developments. In both cases the collusion served to boost Kiir’s questionable legitimacy. The 2019 prayer for reconciliation was attended by

government officials but Kiir’s would-be partner was absent. The fact that the transitional government was indeed later formed, after a 1,5-years delay, could barely have been attributed to T.B. Joshua, but rather to efforts by Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and South Africa’s deputy president, David Mabuza (Vhumbunu, 2020). Still the South Sudanese president’s way of granting Joshua a state position (2014) or communicating his alleged agency (2020) helped to solidify SCOAN’s statesman image.

Growing collusion between the Zimbabwean government and the pastors, mirroring similar processes in Nigeria, Liberia, or South Sudan, opened new avenues for Pentecostalisation of the state’s foreign policy. If South Sudanese Kiir, like Tanzania’s Magufuli saw an influential pastor as a “diplomat” prepositioned to fix their domestic crises, Zimbabwe’s President Emmerson Mnangagwa took a different path when on March 17, 2021, he appointed the prophet Ueber Angel, a UK-based popular preacher and entrepreneur, a Presidential Envoy and his first Ambassador at Large, effectively officialising him as top state functionary. Author of the book “The Money Is Coming” became Zimbabwe’s special representative to 85 countries in Europe and the Americas. His main task in this capacity (he continued as preacher simultaneously) was to use his business skills and networks to attract investments, so that Mnangagwa can claim effectiveness in furthering his “open to business” agenda. Emblematically, Angel was also given a fully equipped office at the State House in Harare. However, before he could deliver any tangible results, the pastor became infamously known as a key figure in gold smuggling and money-laundering, revealed in the Al Jazeera documentary “Gold Mafia” (*How a ‘Gold Mafia’...*, 2023), which sent shockwaves across Zimbabwe. Angel was subject to investigations and his reputation seemed irreversibly damaged. The experiment with turning a spiritual ambassador into a real one not only hurt Zimbabwe’s image, but also brought dubious pastors under scrutiny and opened questions on the qualities of many members of the prophetic community.

Despite the controversies, by early August 2023, Fortune Charumbira, the Zimbabwean president of the Pan-African Parliament (a body falling under the African Union, AU), succeeded in lobbying for Uebert Angel to be appointed its ambassador for Interfaith Dialogue and Humanitarian Affairs.

⁶ During the sermon T.B. Joshua recalled he received seven earlier invitations to South Sudan, but this was the first one God told him to accept.

Charumbira defended this choice by referring to the criminal allegations against Angel as “hersay” and calling him a “godfather of the modern-day prophetic movement” (Langa, 2023). He placed Angel’s spiritual credentials higher than the very competences needed for the duty at the expense of the likely reputational damage done to the very institution he represented. As Parliament’s ambassador, Angel would have been expected to help in reconciling communities divided by ethnic, religious, or xenophobic violence. This despite the history of his own involvement in exploiting anti-migrant sentiments. His (and Malawian Shepard Bushiri’s, who used to call Angel his spiritual father) short-lived Apex World News (*Prophet Bushiri...*, 2020), a would-be global TV news agency positioning itself within the alt-right spectrum, placed xenophobic (anti-migrant) references at the centre of its messaging. In this case, Angel’s philanthropic record (Kadungure, 2021) or his services done to the ruling ZANU-PF (like supplying – illegally – state treasury with hard currency or supporting 2023 Mnangagwa’s campaign) cannot fully explain insistence on his candidacy for the continental post. The government didn’t have to offer him a career path to exploit his popularity – he was already a rich and influential ZANU-PF ally. More convincing explanation can be derived from the influence that *prosperity gospel* – in its specific form – had on the political culture within African institutions. As meteoric rise in material wealth of the famous Pentecostal prophets proved – to their faithful – their anointment, their congregations tended to naturally excuse them from any financial scrutiny (Smith, 2021, p. 104). Similar reasoning could have played out in the Pan-African Parliament’s deliberations over Angel’s candidacy. In this optics, his qualities proved very enriching.

But there is another, more positive side of the coin: the essentially political question of African agency on the global stage⁷. To make the aspiration formulated in AU’s Agenda 2063 of Africa becoming a “strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner” (Our Aspirations for the Africa..., n.d.) materialise, acknowledging a change in thinking about Africa’s qualities was needed both on the continent and in the outside world. For the relationship to the Global North be more *equal*, a fundamental question about Africa’s

input into global cultural or intellectual development must be answered positively. Pentecostal prophets, who garner global audiences can be seen as agents of such a change in perception. This can be read from T.B. Joshua’s self-acknowledgement:

“The uniqueness of my ministry characterized by miracle-filled crusades is significantly anchored on the fact that rather than the blacks having to travel to Europe and America and other developed countries to experience God’s grace, it is the other way round. My team and I have been known to visit countries, which hitherto hardly ever recognized any good thing coming out of black soil (...) (Joshua, 2018).

Ikem, Ogbonna and Nwoke argued for translating the fact that top Nigerian churches have broader and thicker networks of foreign branches than the country’s diplomatic service into an “utilitarian prospect in projecting Nigeria’s soft power” (Ikem Afamefune, Ogbonna Confidence, Nwoke Cordelia, 2019, p. 18). They saw Pentecostalism as already, indirectly, transforming Nigeria’s, and Africa’s broader international standing. It was therefore natural to expect states to recognise and absorb it into their policies.

For similar reasons, Bishop Meshack Tebe, leader of South Africa’s All Africa Alliance Movement (AAAM), formed in 2022 to re-religionise the country’s politics, considered the controversial Malawian pastor, Shepherd Bushiri, a role model for South African entrepreneurship and political activism. That was despite the pastor, who became one of Africa’s richest religious leaders, disgracefully fleeing Pretoria while on bail to escape trial where he was charged with fraud and money laundering (*Shepherd Bushiri...*, 2020) – leaving his congregation to crumble (Author’s visit..., 2022). For Tebe, Bushiri’s value was in the fact that rich and influential, transnationally appealing pastors like him form “a new, black African elite, which poses a challenge to the post-colonial economic order and spearhead a true and final African liberation” (Bishop Meshack Tebe..., 2022). In this assumption, he refers to the very real problem of continued lack of sufficient capital accumulation in the hands of black entrepreneurs which would allow resetting rules of competition in the business/investment sphere in Africa. As economically advantageous foreign

⁷ By 2023 the issue took central place in the African public debate in the context of the war in Ukraine and its global consequences. In June 2023 leaders of seven African states formed a peace-seeking mission which travelled to Ukraine and Russia – the first of the kind when Africans sought fixing major crisis in the Global North. In September 2023 the African Union ascended to full membership in the G20 and question of how to utilise it arose.

actors dominate this field, they enjoy their leverage on weak African states, which makes them seen as agenda-setters. From this perspective, pastors like Bushiri, Uebert Angel, late T.B. Joshua, or Oyedepo are becoming something much bigger than would-be peacemakers, quasi diplomats, or lone players in the soft power field: they are viewed as agents of an economic and political shift, that would foster a qualitative change in Africa's relation with the Global North.

Conclusion

Over the last 15 years African Pentecostal leaders became deeply involved in politics – first by pronouncing political prophecies, then by attempting to influence political processes more directly. With rapid growth of their congregations, global church networks and material wealth, they became attractive partners for politicians who sought them as vote brokers. Those interactions brought elements of churches' religiously and ideologically-driven ideas – particularly the *prosperity gospel* – to the spotlight and to states' agendas. By such, they started affecting and transforming the political cultures in which they operated. If there is a politically relevant aspect of the influence of the Pentecostals on ways politics is being practiced in Africa, that would be a shift towards a top-down, "parochial" style of relations between actors and their constituencies (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 17–19). That constructs, in Mamdani's terms, political communities made of *subjects* rather than of *citizens* (Mamdani, 1996). Uebert Angel's ascension to the honorary post in the pan-African institution during the unprecedented embezzlement saga only makes sense when one's legitimacy lays on being part of the (Pentecostal/prophetic) community rather than on formal qualifications; when supra-natural argumentation and not merits define the political discourse; and when spiritually sanctioned religious leaders are seen as naturally senior to elected officials. All of that represents a step back from the African politics' road towards more individual agency and civic participation. However, in some contexts the same attributes work for the benefit of recognising greater African global agency, which is a desirable.

It is debatable whether, and to which extent those new actors pose a challenge to the established political orders in Sub-Saharan Africa. This article argues that such a challenge exists in the form of perception that religious leaders can intervene more efficiently than state structures,

either internally or in regional affairs. The stage is therefore set for a clash, or co-optation which enables re-shaping rules of the game from within. Certainly, situations when African Pentecostal leaders hold keys to political victories are not marginal anymore but found their place at the very centre of African electoral politics. Understanding dynamics behind it becomes a necessity for anyone seeking to read African politics at large and predicting its future.

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