

Interrogating Governance Challenges in Nigeria Through a Semiotic Appraisal of Select Political Cartoons by Mike Asukwo

Nneka Stella Odoh, PhD

Department of Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses governance challenges in Nigeria through a semiotic examination of select political cartoons by the prominent Nigerian cartoonist, Mike Asukwo. These cartoons provide a critique of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration. The data consists of 20 political cartoons published in the *BusinessDay* Newspaper in 2025. A sample size of 4 cartoons were purposively selected and analysed based on their relevance to the topic under study as well as the presence of rich semiotic resources. Roland Barthes' (1977) model of analysis, particularly his perception of denotation and connotation theories anchored on three levels of signification (linguistic, literal and symbolic) was used as the analytical framework to examine how the verbal and visual elements employed in the cartoons interrogate governance challenges in Nigeria. The analysis revealed the use of caricature, analogies, facial expressions, gestures, and colour as compositional devices at the denoted level to depict objects, ideas, and people that have connections to real-life events and experiences. Also, rhetorical devices like allusion, personification, irony, symbolism, hyperbole, contrast and condensation were used in the cartoons at the linguistic, literal, and symbolic levels to construct humorous satirical messages. Corruption, abuse of power, lack of empathy, and weak public institutions are identified as some of the critical factors that promote bad governance in Nigeria. The study provides a contextual lens for understanding how political cartoons function as a tool for meaning-making and speaking truth to power within the interpretive fields of semiotics and multimodal discourse.

Keywords: leadership crises, humour, political cartoons, semiotics, visual metaphor

INTRODUCTION

Political cartoons embody expressive communicative frameworks that underscore the relationship between art and politics on the one hand, and between art and society on the other hand. Elderfield's (2006, p.44) statements that art is political if it "extends the thread of recognition and understanding beyond what previously was seen and known," and also if it reinterprets "what previously was seen and known" in order to give rise to alternative understandings, provide insightful contexts for understanding the political nature of art. As a powerful medium imbued with political force, political cartoon genre constitutes a part of mediated filtering systems (Van Hecke, 2016) that interrogate societal issues, bringing them to the forefront of national discourse. Its expressiveness in addressing societal problems derives from the inherent attribute of condensing vast amounts of detail into easily readable formats that embody the essence of issues or events that, ordinarily, may appear complex (Van Hecke, 2016). Structurally, political cartoons comprise texts or images, or the combination of both, either in a single or multi-panelled format. In most cases, the text(s) and image(s) are involved in rhetorical dialogue which creates metaphors that could be easily interpreted by viewers based on their intimate knowledge of, and cognitive ability to connect with the object or subject of the cartoon thereby eliciting the desired response to the humorous approach used in delivering the intended message (Odoh, Odoh & Asogwa, 2023). Humour and satire are important devices employed in political cartoons. These are achieved through processes that involve the invention of content, arrangement of the content for specific effect, and the stylish presentation of the content

through the application of creative principles that are peculiar to the medium (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981). The use of humorous satirical elements in political cartoons to address societal issues encapsulates the idea of “using the outward veneer of laughter and amusement to veil the bitter truths of society (Akande, 2002). It also allows the cartoonist to focus “the humiliating searchlight of ridicule and irreverence on greed, corruption, and abuse of power” (Eko, 2010, p. 89).

Political cartoons have an embodied presence in Nigeria’s political life and have been used to interrogate the myriad problems plaguing the country. Cartoonists like Akinola Lasekan, Mustafa Balama, Frank Oyekusibe, Bennett Omeke, and Mike Asukwo, just to mention a few, have used the medium to speak truth to power and draw public’s attention to various ills bedevilling the Nigerian society. Mike Asukwo’s political cartoons are well-known for their strong wit and insightful commentaries on Nigeria’s socio-political space. Drawing from the inexhaustible pool of artistic imagination and the skilful manipulation of the rhetorical power of texts and images, Asukwo constructs profound imageries and metaphors that vividly narrate existential realities in Nigeria. In this sense, his political cartoons function as a visual narrative frame that contemporaneously historicises Nigeria’s ever changing socio-political landscape. His cartoons frequently target those in political authority, highlighting how their actions or inactions frame leadership challenges in Nigeria.

This paper examines how select political cartoons by Mike Asukwo address governance challenges in Nigeria. Four political cartoons were selected for analysis based on their respective themes that problematize governance challenges in Nigeria. A semiotic approach anchored on Barthes’ (1977) three levels of signification, the linguistic message, the non-coded iconic message, and coded iconic message, was employed in analysing the cartoons. While the linguistic message refers to the title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, or comic strip balloon that could be present in every image, the non-coded (denoted) messages and coded (connoted) iconic messages refer to the denotative and connotative qualities of an image respectively. Barthes semiotic approach to reading the image provides useful contexts for understanding how these three levels of signification interact with one another in order to generate meaning. He interpreted signs as embodying physical (signifier) and conceptual (signified) forms whose meanings are often shaped by cultural, societal, and historical subjectivities. At that point at the denoted level when the signified has a direct relationship to the signifier, Barthes explains that “the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message” by providing support and contextualization in ways that make the connoted message unambiguous (Barthes, 1977, p. 45). He further reveals that the meaning(s) generated at the connoted level is reflective of “the manner in which society communicates what it thinks of itself” (p. 17) and the meaning “can already be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message” (p. 19).

The study leverages these interpretive guides in its examination of the linguistic and non-linguistic devices employed in the cartoons and how their complementary associations constructs potent imageries and metaphors that humorously interrogate Nigeria’s governance experiences. The goal is to further reinforce political cartoons’ rhetorical power, expressiveness, and political force, particularly in the context of shaping public discourse, critiquing power structures and social constructions, as well as advocating for change.

Political Cartoons and the Crises of Governance in Nigeria

Nigeria’s socio-political history has been bedevilled by disruptive actions that negatively impact on the nation’s development. One of the major factors responsible for this is the apparent lack of quality leadership that is purposeful and people-driven. Achebe’s (1983) summation that the major problem with Nigeria is failure of leadership reinforces this. This leadership challenge persists because of the inability of leaders to fulfil the requirements of their position and office (Nweke, 2023, para 2). Okoi and Iwara (2021, para 1) also notes that this failure of governance in Nigeria “manifests in the declining capacity of political leaders to recognize systemic risks such as election fraud, terrorist attacks, herder-farmer conflict, armed banditry, and police brutality and put in place the necessary measures to navigate these challenges.” Other factors that highlight governance challenges in Nigeria include endemic corruption, poverty, unemployment, lack of public trust, weak institutions, lack of accountability, lack of critical infrastructure, and political violence, among others. Most of these factors are backed by statistical evidence. For instance, Nigeria ranks poorly in the world governance index based on the country’s abysmal indexes on corruption perception, rule of law, press freedom and political rights

(World Economics, 2025). Specifically, in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria scored 26 out of 100 and ranked 140th out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2025), indicating that Nigeria is a highly corrupt country.

Nigeria's crises of governance create room for systemic failure which is characterised by "the declining capacity of the state to cope with a range of internal political and social upheavals" (Okoi & Iwara, 2021, para 1). It is within the disruptive spaces engendered by social and political upheavals that political cartoons have been deployed as "constructed, ritualistic, interpretive texts" that are "performed on slices of reality for purposes of political and social criticism, as well as ethical evaluation" (Eko, 2010, p. 69). Several studies have examined the various ways through which political cartoons have been used to address societal ills in Nigeria. For instance, studies carried out by Jimoh, 2010; Adejuwon & Alimi, 2011; Sani, Abdullah, Abdullah, and Ali, 2012; and Onakpa, 2014, highlight its agenda-setting role. Onakpa (2014) acknowledges the importance of cartoons and cartoonists with respect to Nigeria's print media and also reinforces the view that 'cartoons help to set the tone of public discussions over issues of national concern' (p. 40). Adejuwon and Alimi (2011) shine historical light on the important roles that political cartoons have played in critiquing political process in Nigeria over the years. Using randomly selected cartoons sourced from various Nigerian newspapers, they highlight each cartoonist's style and how the cartoons address some of the factors that have shaped the political process in Nigeria over the years including inequality, greed, financial rascality, and press freedom among others. Sani et al (2012) draws attention to the agenda setting function of political cartoons using a semiotic approach to examine the connotation and denotation elements in the cartoons. The study concludes "that Nigerian political cartoons adopt a specific pattern of depicting substantive issues reflecting current socio-political issues in the Nigerian context" (p. 162). Also, democratic leadership, corruption, foreign policy, living standard, economy and infrastructure were identified as the dominant thematic areas addressed in the cartoons analysed.

In addition, studies by Jimoh (2019); Ifechelobi and Nwachukwu (2021); Odoh, Odoh & Asogwa (2023) and Targema, Obong and Mohammed (2025), focused attention on the rhetorical devices used by Nigerian cartoonists, particularly Mike Asukwo, to communicate his intended messages and bring them at the forefront of public discourse. Through the use of multimodal, social semiotic and semiotic approaches, these studies offer insightful information on the various rhetorical devices (both linguistic and visual elements) employed in the respective political cartoons that were analysed and how these are humorously applied in addressing socio-political conditions in Nigeria. In harnessing its agenda setting function, these cartoons are "used by the media specifically to build up public attention, reorient people and initiate social and political reforms in Nigeria" (Ifechelobi & Nwachukwu, 2021, p. 11). Also, while they offer ample opportunities for political communication through their potential to enhance cartoon-digital media relationship that can be optimally harnessed in setting the tone of public discourse on existential challenges in Nigeria (Targema, Obong & Mohammed, 2025), they equally highlight how cartoonists construct counter narratives that challenge the status quo through the use of metaphorical imageries to veil their subject matter (Odoh, Odoh & Asogwa, 2023; Jimoh, 2019).

Semiotic Analysis of Select Cartoons by Mike Asukwo

As earlier mentioned, Barthes' (1977) semiotic approach to reading the image which takes cognizance of three levels of signification (linguistic message, non-coded iconic message and coded iconic message) will be employed in analysing select political cartoons by the prominent Nigerian cartoonist, Mike Asukwo. The data comprised twenty (20) political cartoons by the cartoonist published in *BusinessDay* Newspaper in 2025 were purposively selected because of the relevance of their themes to the topic under study. Due to space constraints, four (4) cartoons were selected for analysis based on the fact that their themes broadly reflect some of the critical factors affecting good governance in Nigeria. They were also chosen because they contain rich semiotic resources. The cartoons offer instructive contexts for understanding how the cartoonist uses linguistic and visual devices to communicate his views about governance in Nigeria.

Shutting Down Democracy, One State at a Time



Figure 1: Shutting Down Democracy, One State at a Time

Source: <https://x.com/asukwoeb?lang=en>

In the cartoon titled *Shutting Down Democracy, One State at a Time* (Figure 1), Mike Asukwo makes reference to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. In light of the role played by Nyesom Wike, the immediate past Governor of Rivers State, in securing victory for Tinubu’s ruling party, All Progressive Congress (APC) in the State in the last general election, despite belonging to an opposition party, this act by the President was perceived as being politically driven in order to favor Nyesom Wike who was battling with the current Governor, Sim Fubara, over the control of the State. Tinubu’s declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State for six months and the suspending of the elected governor and members of the House of Assembly was met with severe public backlash as the height of executive overreach.

At the linguistic level, several texts are identified. These include, “DEMOCRACY HALL”; “On and Off” (inscriptions on seven control switches); “FAULTY DO NOT TOUCH” (written on the notice pasted under the

Lagos Switch); “BAT EMERGENCIES” (written on the helmet worn by the figure in the foreground) and “LAGOS”, “RIVERS”, “AKWA IBOM”, “ANAMBRA”, “DELTA” AND “OSUN” (names of some states in Nigeria written on top of the switches). All the texts are written in uppercase for emphasis. The use of allusion is noticeable in some of the captions. For instance, “DEMOCRACY HALL” alludes to democratic governance in Nigeria. Also, “BAT EMERGENCIES” serves the purpose of identifying the governance style of Nigeria’s President whose initial is BAT – Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Furthermore, the listed States allude to the institution of state governments.

The visual elements that constitute the denoted message include the following: a hallway inside an edifice with central air conditioning system and lights; seven visible control switches; a notice sign under the control switch for Lagos State; a colour palette comprising light and dark gray tones and muted tones of red, green, light pink and light purple; and three helmet-wearing technicians. Two of the technicians are depicted advancing from the right side of hall towards the dominant figure in the foreground shown carrying a toolbox with the left hand and pulling down the lever of the control switch for Rivers State to the off position with his right hand. This figure is a caricature representation of the President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The trademark spectacle and the helmet with the inscription, “BAT EMERGENCIES” are obvious clues that reveal the identity of the figure. Also, the five control switches at the right side of the President are depicted in good working condition with the wires connecting the switches still intact. However, the two control switches on the left are faulty. While the electrical wire protruding from the Lagos State control switch has been cut, hence the notice below, that for Rivers State shows sparking wires that have been disconnected from other control switches. Three rhetorical devices are clearly evident at the denoted level. The application of condensation, a rhetorical device that represents complex ideas using a single image that graphically portrays its essence (Morris, 1993) is noticed in the cartoonist’s use of the President’s image and action to represent political power and authority. The use of symbolism is read in the use of control switches to represent governance at the state level while irony is perceived in the selective act is shutting down the control switch for Rivers State and leaving that for Lagos notwithstanding the fact that it is faulty.

Connotatively, the linguistic and denoted messages combine to communicate the message of unrestrained power. Mike Asukwo portrays President Tinubu as a leader who can unilaterally shut down democratic governance in a state and suspend a democratically elected governor and other elected officials as was the case with the emergency rule he declared in the State that triggered debates on the constitutionality of his actions. With the control switches of other states at the mercy of his whims and caprices, Mike Asukwo, in this cartoon, raises alarm on the grave danger this unbridled use of power poses to Nigeria’s democracy. The hypocrisy that comes with exercising political power is further highlighted by the President’s attitude towards Lagos and Rivers States. While he decisively acts on the perceived political problem in Rivers State, democratic governance in Lagos State, a state he once governed and is believed to still wield very strong influence on its governance affairs (Fasan, 2018; Joseph, 2025), is allowed to go on despite experiencing similar problems.

The Reality is Closer Than You Think.

Concept wise, the cartoon, *The Reality is Closer Than You Think* (Figure 2), was inspired by the controversial comments made by the Senate President of Nigeria, Godwill Akpabio, in the wake of the End Bad Governance Protests, a series of decentralised protests that took place in Nigeria from August 1 -10, 2024. Akpabio is quoted to have made the statement, “You can protest, but we will be eating” (Adebowale, 2024). Five texts constitute the linguistic message in the cartoon. They comprise the two verbal captions contained in speech bubbles that read “HEY..DON’T CHANGE THE CHANNEL, I LOVE UNCOMMON REALITY SHOWS!”, and “SENATOR, THAT IS NOT THE TELEVISION, SIR, THAT IS THE WINDOW!”, “UNCOMMON POPCORN” written on the bowl, and the captions, “END BAD GOVERNANCE” and “HUNGER IS KILLING US” written on the placards carried by the protesters. The use of hyperbole, contrast and allusion are identified in the texts. While the former is represented by the statement, hunger is killing us, contrast is deployed as a literary device in the speech made by the police orderly to show contrast between two things. Also, the word “UNCOMMON” found in the Senator’s speech bubble and also written on the popcorn bowl, is an adjective frequently used by Senator Godswill Akpabio to describe himself. Here, the cartoonist uses it as an allusion in order to reveal the identity of the politician in the cartoon without calling his name.



Figure 2: The Reality is Closer Than You Think.

Source: <https://x.com/asukwoeb?lang=en>

The dominant signs in the denoted message comprise an air conditioner on the wall; a caricature depicting a well-fed figure of the Senate President, Godswill Akpabio wearing his trademark cap, a shirt and shorts and reclining in a sofa; a police orderly; a centre rug; a curtain hanging on the wall; and an exposed window showing protesters outside carrying placards. Tints of blue, purple and pink hues with muted shades of red, green, blue, brown, yellow ochre and black constitute the colour palette. Additionally, the Senate President is shown carrying a glass of wine with his left hand while the right hand reaches for popcorn contained in a bowl placed on top of a small stool beside him. His shirt hardly covers his big pot belly and the sofa he is sitting on appears to sag under his weight.

At the connoted level, the verbal and visual messages combine to show the insensitive nature of governance in Nigeria. Asukwo uses a visual interpretation of the Senate President's statement before the protest to show that political leaders in Nigeria are lacking in empathy and disconnected from reality. For the Senate President, the hardship and hunger being experienced and expressed by the masses are nothing more than a reality show meant for his amusement and relaxation. The class gap between the rich and the poor is visually expressed by the Senate President's opulent lifestyle and over-weight body which strongly contrasts with the body frame of the angry and frustrated protesters. The exclamation made by police orderly serves a reality check reminding the amused politician that the unsavoury consequence of bad leadership is closer than he thinks.

Your Money and Your Life!



Your Money and Your Life!

Source: <https://x.com/asukwoeb?lang=en>

In the cartoon titled, “Your Money and Your Life,” Mike Asukwo queries the economic policies of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s administration. He draws inspiration from the removal of fuel subsidy as announced by the President Tinubu during his May 29, 2023 inauguration speech. His pronouncement on the fuel subsidy caused a significant hike in petroleum products, food and transportation thereby raising the cost of living and reducing the citizens’ purchasing power. In the cartoon, “N617” written on the fuel dispensing machine is the only text identified at the linguistic level. The denoted message comprises a fuel dispensing machine rendered with green, gray, deep pink and orange hues, and a looming image of President Tinubu portrayed in caricature form wearing his trademark red cap with one eye closed and holding a dripping fuel nozzle like a gun pointed at the viewer.

The connoted message communicates a profound message despite the limited use of textual elements in the cartoon. The “N617” written on the fuel dispensing machine which represents the new pump price as against the old price of N190 before the removal of fuel subsidy provides a symbolic function and is used to convey the stark reality of what lies ahead. The image of the President also speaks volume when analysed within the context of the title, “Your Money and Your Life” which is a corrupted form of the phrase, ‘your money or your life’. Literally, the latter is used in a life threatening situation like robbery where the choice is either giving up money or risk being killed. From an ethical or philosophical point of view, it also reflects how we prioritize values in life. Furthermore, it can be used as a literary device to create suspense, highlight a moral dilemma or point out a character’s greed. In the cartoon’s connoted message, President Tinubu is portrayed as a character lacking in compassion and empathy, and full of greed. For the Nigerian masses, there are no options to choose from between money and their lives, the President’s ‘aim’ (pun intended) is to kill them financially and physically.

The Eagle with Cataracts



Figure 4: **The Eagle with Cataracts**

Source: <https://x.com/asukwoeb?lang=en>

Mike Asukwo's cartoon, *The Eagle with Cataracts*, focuses attention on the state of the fight against corruption in Nigeria. The high rate of corruption in Nigeria is one of the major vices affecting the nation's development and good standing in the comity of nations. Three verbal captions are contained in the linguistic message: the sentence in the speech bubble which reads, "OGA EAGLE, ARE YOU STILL LOOKING FOR THIS MAN OR ARE YOU PLANNING TO MAKE HIM AN ANTI-CORRUPTION AMBASSADOR?" the word, "WANTED" written on the paper held up by the man, and the acronym, "EFCC", which stands for the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, attached on the body of the eagle. Analysis of the linguistic message shows the use of personification, cultural borrowing, irony and punchline. These are all contained in the speech bubble. The word, "OGA EAGLE", which starts the sentence, is a form of salutation and acts as personification when used to address a non-human object (the eagle) as if it were a human being. In terms of cultural borrowing, the word, "OGA" is a widely used Nigerian pidgin term with its origin in Ibo language and connotes a boss or superior. Given the statutory function of EFCC to fight corruption and bring offenders to justice, the statement made by the man who addresses the eagle expresses an ironical thought which questions the integrity and objectivity of the anti-corruption agency. Furthermore, the concluding sentence in the speech bubble functions as punchline which carries the weight of the intended message, causing the viewer's understanding of the story to shift from the primary interpretation to a secondary and often opposing interpretation.

The denoted message depicts a profile view of a big Eagle's head wearing eyeglass (presumably medicated) on the left side of the composition. On the right side, a man wearing green striped shirt and blue trousers is shown confronting the eagle with a wanted notice bearing the portrait of the former governor of Kogi State, Yahaya Bello who was declared wanted for corruption related crimes by the anti-corruption agency. The use of symbolism, metaphor, condensation and irony is evident in the denoted message. This is perceived in the symbolic use of the eagle image which is a dominant element in the logo of the agency to identify the target of the cartoon. Also, qualities of an eagle such as keen vision, strong leadership qualities and tenacity are metaphorically ascribed to the EFCC. However, depicting the eagle as having bad eyesight and having to wear medicated glasses is quite antithetical to the exceptional eyesight of the eagle and therefore functions as an irony in this context.

The rhetorical devices and other compositional elements employed in both the linguistic and denoted messages come together at the connoted level to paint a picture of an anti-corruption agency that is inefficient, subjective in its dealings, and burdened with accusations of not getting its priorities right. By subtly alluding to the controversial dramas that played out in EFCC's handling of the Yahaya Bello case, the cartoon sends a strong message that weak government institutions undermine public trust and negatively affect governance.

CONCLUSION

Mike Asukwo's political cartoons offer insightful contexts for understanding the state of governance in Nigeria. The semiotic analysis of the verbal and visual messages contained in the cartoons reveals the use of rhetorical devices such as allusion, personification, irony, symbolism, cultural borrowing, hyperbole, contrast and condensation to embody and convey information. Also, compositional devices such as caricature, analogies, facial expressions, gestures, and colour were used by the cartoonist at the denoted level to depict objects, ideas, and people that have connections to real-life experiences. At the level of the connoted message, poignant imageries and metaphors humorously satirize socio-political conditions in Nigeria were generated through the rhetorical dialogue between the linguistic message and the denoted message. Furthermore, the study identified some of the key factors responsible for governance challenges in Nigeria. These include abuse of power, disregard for the rule of law, lack of empathy among the political elite, corruption, hasty implementation of government policies and weak public institutions.

The agenda setting function of political cartoons make it a powerful tool for social activism. Political cartoons thrive on the humorous representation of real life experiences. Its humorous effect rests on the incongruity that exists between what is expressed in the cartoon and the viewer's ability to reconstruct the cartoonist's satirical target (Chu, 2020). Mike Asukwo's political cartoons that address governance challenges in Nigeria convey serious messages cloaked in humour and acerbic wit. As Sorensen (2014) rightly points out, humorous political cartoons provide the cartoonist with nonviolent pathways for speaking truth to power and also create room for social actors to be creative in seeking new ways of challenging dominant discourses.

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