



# Failed Election Manifestoes, Discursive Power and U.S. Military Intervention in Nigeria: A Language-Centered Analysis of Sovereignty, Terror and Political Legitimacy

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This article examines the United States' airstrike in northwestern Nigeria through the combined aperture of political language, unfulfilled electoral manifestoes, and external military intervention. It argues that the air-raid cannot be seen and understood merely as counterterrorism operations but as a discursive event which was produced, justified, and contested through language. Through a cross-fertilization of ideas from international relations theory, critical discourse analysis and political economy, the article explores how electoral promises in Nigeria failed to materialize into effective security governance, thereby creating a linguistic and political vacuum that foreign powers; most notably the United States could fill. The paper further interrogates how President Donald Trump's rhetoric, religious framing, and power projection intersect with Nigeria's domestic political fragility, contested sovereignty, and the symbolic collapse of campaign manifestoes into performative texts rather than governing instruments.

**Keywords:** : Political discourse, Election manifestoes, Speech act theory, Critical discourse analysis, Sovereignty, U.S. military intervention, Counterterrorism rhetoric, Discursive power, Political legitimacy.

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## Introduction

### *Language Fails before the State Does*

States rarely collapse suddenly. Long before institutions weaken, language collapses first. Manifestoes lose meaning, promises become ritualistic, and political communication turns symbolic rather than operational. In Nigeria, this linguistic erosion is particularly evident in the domain of national security. The recent U.S. airstrike on terrorist targets in northwestern Nigeria, publicly acknowledged by President

Donald Trump and confirmed by Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Yusuf Tuggar, has reignited debates not only about sovereignty and military cooperation, but also about why Nigeria required such intervention at all. This question cannot be answered by military analysis alone. It demands attention to what Nigerian leaders promised, how they framed those promises, and how those promises failed in practice.

Election manifestoes in Nigeria, especially since 2009, when terrorism became a defining national



crisis; have consistently emphasized security, territorial integrity, and protection of citizens. Notably is President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's mantra "Renewed Hope," with a focus on tackling insecurity, reviving the economy, and fighting corruption (Alikor 2024). Yet, despite repeated electoral cycles, terrorism has mutated rather than diminished, shifting geographically and tactically. This failure is not merely operational; it is discursive and indicative of how election manifestoes have failed not just as a promissory document but also as a national indication of hope and action plan.

When a state repeatedly promises security and fails to deliver, the meaning of sovereignty in essence becomes unstable. Into this instability promotes the interference of foreign power. Hence The United States airstrikes that targeted Islamic State group militants in northwestern Nigeria on marked a major escalation in an offensive that the West African's overstretched military has struggled with for years (Asadu 2025).

### ***Failed Manifestoes as Political Texts Without intention and Enforcement***

#### **The Manifesto as a Speech Act**

In political philosophy, an election manifesto is not just a strategy document, it is a speech act because is meant to perform; it does something, it generates anticipations, forms the foundation of democratic legitimacy, and constructs a future-oriented narrative. In Nigeria, security-focused manifestoes have functioned primarily as illocutionary acts devoid of perlocutionary effect: they are uttered with mastery, received applause, and advertently forgotten.

Since 2013, nearly all major political party manifestoes have sworn:

- To defeat terrorism
- To restore territorial control
- To protect religious and ethnic communities

- To modernize intelligence and military capacity

Yet these pledges remain linguistically intact while materially hollow.

This disconnect matters. When manifestoes fail repeatedly, they stop being instruments of governance and symbols of political performance. Citizens no longer interpret them as binding commitments but as campaign rituals that are devoid of meaningful actions.

### **Security Promises and the Normalization of Failure**

The repetition of unfulfilled security promises has produced what can be called discursive fatigue. Terrorism becomes normalized, and political language shifts from resolution to management. Leaders no longer promise victory; they promise "efforts," "commitment," and "collaboration."

This linguistic downgrade has consequences:

- It lowers public expectations
- It reduces accountability
- It creates space for foreign actors to define the problem—and the solution

In this sense, U.S. military intervention is not a rupture but a continuation of Nigeria's discursive trajectory of dependency despite and ingloriously celebrated independence!

### ***U.S. Power Projection and the Language of Moral Authority***

#### **Power Projection beyond Missiles**

Power projection is often defined militarily, but its most enduring form is discursive. The United States did not merely strike targets in Nigeria; it named the violence, framed the victims, and claimed moral urgency. President Trump's statement that terrorists were "brutally murdering mostly innocent Christians, at rates not witnessed in many years, and even centuries" is significant not because of its empirical

accuracy alone, but because of its rhetorical construction. Trump's unapologetic utterance is a brazen display authority and his imposition of stance

The language does three things:

1. It universalizes the threat
2. It moralizes the conflict
3. It positions the U.S. as a civilizational protector

This framing transforms a Nigerian security crisis into a global moral issue, thereby legitimizing external intervention.

### Asymmetry in Who Gets to Speak

Nigeria cannot conduct surveillance flights over U.S. territory. It cannot unilaterally frame American domestic violence as genocide. This asymmetry reveals that sovereignty today is not only about borders, but about who controls the narrative. By publicly announcing the strikes and framing them religiously, the U.S. asserted not just military dominance but interpretive authority. Nigeria's subsequent confirmations, while necessary diplomatically, functioned as reactive speech acts rather than initiatory ones.

This reversal, where the host nation confirms what the intervening nation declares, signals a discursive imbalance rooted in years of domestic political failure.

### Religion, Selective Visibility, and the Politics of Naming Victims

The controversy surrounding the emphasis on Christian victims reveals a deeper linguistic struggle. Terrorism in Nigeria affects Muslims, Christians, and others indiscriminately, as evidenced by attacks such as the bombing of the Al-Adum Juma'at Mosque in Maiduguri.

However, Johan Galtung's (1969) work on peace and violence reminds us that silencing particular victim groups in the name of balance can itself be a form of structural violence. When Christian

suffering is consistently underemphasized domestically, external amplification becomes more likely.

Trump's language, therefore, does not invent Christian victimhood; it selects and amplifies it for political purposes.

This selective visibility serves dual functions:

- Domestically in the U.S., it mobilizes religious constituencies
- Internationally, it reframes Nigeria's crisis in civilizational terms

### Nigeria's 2027 Elections and the Collapse of Security Credibility

The approach of the 2027 elections intensifies the stakes. The current administration, already burdened by a Muslim-Muslim ticket, faces a credibility deficit on security. Rejecting U.S. assistance in the face of genocide allegations would be politically disastrous. Thus, cooperation becomes less a strategic choice and more a discursive necessity. To refuse would be to implicitly accept the accusation of failure.

Here again, failed manifestoes haunt the present. The government cannot convincingly argue that it has security under control when the language of its own past promises contradicts reality. Cluelessly, the present administration seem to have failed in many areas. Lack of focus and allowing affluent individual to extend politico-entrepreneurial gestures of intimidation and show has crystalized in the emergence of city boy movement.

### Economic Dependencies and the Grammar of Compliance

Beyond politics, economic realities shape linguistic posture. Nigeria's need for:

- U.S. military aid
- Intelligence cooperation
- Trade concessions

- Removal of restrictions

Limits the range of possible official responses. Sovereignty, in this context, is grammatically softened. Statements emphasize “collaboration,” “partnership,” and “mutual interest” rather than autonomy. These are not accidental languages but they are structured restraint.

### **Strategic Risks: When Airstrikes Replace Governance**

The final danger is strategic displacement. Airstrikes without sustained ground governance do not eliminate terrorism; they reconfigure it. Militants move from forests to towns, from ideological warfare to kidnapping and banditry. When this happens, the state’s failure becomes even more visible, and future manifestoes grow even more implausible. Language again precedes collapse.

### ***Election Manifestoes as Speech Acts: A Pragma-Discourse Interpretation***

#### **Manifestoes as Illocutionary Acts (Austin)**

J. L. Austin’s speech act theory provides a foundational lens for understanding election manifestoes not merely as descriptive texts but as performative utterances. Manifestoes do not simply describe intended futures; they *do* something by being uttered in a specific institutional context.

In Austinian terms, Nigerian election manifestoes function primarily as illocutionary acts of promising. However, for a promise to be felicitous, certain conditions must be met:

- The speaker must intend to perform the act
- The speaker must be able to perform the act
- The audience must reasonably expect fulfillment

In the Nigerian context, repeated failure to actualize security promises since 2009 has

progressively violated felicity conditions, rendering manifesto promises pragmatically weakened. The speech act remains grammatically intact but pragmatically hollow.

Thus, when Nigerian leaders promise to “defeat terrorism,” the utterance increasingly functions as what Austin would classify as a misfire: a speech act that is formally valid but institutionally ineffective.

### **Searle (1969): Institutional Facts and Security Promises**

John Searle (1995) extends Austin’s framework by distinguishing between brute facts and institutional facts. Security, sovereignty, and territorial control are institutional facts—they exist because collective belief and institutional practice sustain them.

Election manifestoes are mechanisms through which political actors attempt to constitute institutional facts linguistically. When a manifesto states that a government *will* secure the nation, it attempts to bring into being a future institutional reality.

However, persistent insecurity reveals a rupture between linguistic declaration and institutional enforcement. Over time, the manifesto loses its constitutive power. The promise no longer creates belief; instead, it generates skepticism.

This erosion is critical because once institutional facts lose discursive credibility, external actors gain legitimacy to intervene, both materially and narratively.

### **From Promise to Ritual: The Pragmatics of Repetition**

Repeated manifesto promises without fulfillment transform promising from an act of commitment into a ritualized genre. In pragmatic terms, the force of the illocution weakens with repetition under conditions of failure.

Security promises in Nigerian manifestoes increasingly function as:

- Ritual affirmations of responsibility
- Signals of moral positioning
- Electoral necessities rather than governance plans

This transformation is a key enabling condition for U.S. intervention. When domestic political language no longer convincingly performs state authority, foreign discourse can step in and re-perform it.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis of U.S. Intervention: Power, Ideology, and Framing*

#### **Fairclough: Discourse as Social Practice**

Norman Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously:

- A textual practice
- A discursive practice
- A social practice

Applying this framework, the U.S. airstrikes in Nigeria are not merely military actions but discursive events embedded in power relations. The U.S. did not only conduct airstrikes; it produced authoritative discourse that:

- Defined the nature of the violence
- Identified legitimate victims
- Claimed moral urgency

By publicly announcing the operation, the U.S. assumed discursive primacy, relegating Nigeria to a confirmatory role. This asymmetry reflects broader structural inequalities between the two states.

#### **Van Dijk: Ideological Polarization and Victim Construction**

Teun van Dijk's model of ideological discourse emphasizes ingroup–outgroup polarization, particularly in elite political speech. Trump's

framing of the Nigerian crisis as the mass killing of “mostly innocent Christians” performs classic ideological work:

- Positive self-presentation: the U.S. as protector
- Negative other-presentation: terrorists as civilizational enemies
- Selective emphasis: Christian victimhood foregrounded

This framing does not deny Muslim suffering; rather, it reorders visibility. Such reordering is ideologically strategic, especially for mobilizing domestic U.S. constituencies.

In contrast, Nigerian official discourse adopts depoliticized terms (“bandits,” “criminal elements”), reflecting an attempt to maintain internal cohesion but at the cost of narrative authority.

#### **Discursive Sovereignty and Power Projection**

Sovereignty is traditionally conceived territorially, but discourse analysis reveals a parallel domain: discursive sovereignty—the ability to define events, causes, and moral meanings.

The fact that Nigeria cannot reciprocate U.S. surveillance or public framing underscores a discursive asymmetry. Power projection thus operates linguistically before it operates militarily.

#### **Modality, Agency, and the Political Economy of Compliance**

##### **Modal Analysis of Nigerian Security Discourse**

Modal verbs encode degrees of obligation, certainty, and commitment. An analysis of Nigerian security-related manifestoes reveals a systematic preference for low-commitment modality, which mitigates responsibility.

Table 1: Modal Patterns in Nigerian Security Manifestoes (2009–2023)

Modal Type	Examples	Pragmatic Effect
Low-value modality	<i>may, intend to, seek to</i>	Avoids obligation
Medium-value modality	<i>will, shall</i>	Future-oriented but unenforceable
High-value modality	<i>must, guarantee</i>	Rare; minimizes accountability

This modal pattern reflects what Fairclough (1992) identifies as strategic ambiguity, allowing political actors to claim effort without outcome.

### Agency Suppression and Responsibility

Another recurrent feature is agent suppression. Passive constructions (“terrorist activities will be addressed”) obscure responsibility and diffuse accountability.

Table 2: Agency Patterns in Security Discourse

Construction Type	Example	Discursive Function
Active, agentive	<i>The government will dismantle...</i>	Rare
Passive	<i>Measures will be taken...</i>	Common
Nominalization	<i>Strengthening of security...</i>	Obscures action

Such constructions weaken the perlocutionary force of the manifesto and normalize failure.

Synthesis: Discourse Failure, Intervention, and the Future of Political Legitimacy

### Economic Dependence and Politeness Strategies

Nigeria’s economic dependence on the U.S. shapes its official language. Drawing on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory (as integrated into CDA), official statements employ:

- Deference markers
- Appreciation formulas
- Cooperative framing

This linguistic posture reflects material asymmetry translated into discourse.

### When Speech Acts Fail, Power Speaks

This study demonstrates that the U.S. intervention in Nigeria is not simply a reaction to terrorism but a response to discursive failure within Nigerian political communication.

Election manifestoes lost their illocutionary force. Security promises ceased to constitute institutional facts. As a result, external discourse gained legitimacy.

### Implications for Political Communication and Governance

Three major implications emerge:

1. Manifestoes must regain pragmatic force and promises must be linguistically precise, agentive, and measurable.
2. Narrative control is a security asset as states that fail to define their crises invite external framing.
3. Sovereignty is sustained discursively as loss of narrative authority precedes loss of operational autonomy.

### Conclusion: Sovereignty Is First Lost in Words

The U.S. airstrikes in northwestern Nigeria are not merely military events. They are symptoms of a long discursive decline which indicates a failure of Nigerian political language to translate promises into protection. Election manifestoes that do not govern create vacuums. Vacuums invite power. Power speaks first, strikes next, and justifies itself last. Until Nigerian politics restores credibility between words and action, external intervention; military and linguistic, will remain not only possible, but legitimate in the eyes of the world.

Ultimately, this analysis affirms that sovereignty is not first violated by drones or airstrikes, but by empty words. Where political language repeatedly fails to perform governance, intervention; both military and discursive, becomes not only possible but defensible. Until Nigerian political discourse restores alignment between speech, action, and accountability, election manifestoes will remain symbolic texts, and external actors will continue to speak—and act—on Nigeria's behalf.

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