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Of maladministration and hardship:

Humour, satire, and multimodal framings in Mustapha Bulama's Cartoons

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Highlights

This study examines five political cartoons by Mustapha Bulama to uncover how multimodal frames satirize maladministration and hardship in Nigeria.

Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics, Attardo's incongruity-resolution theory, and Kuypers' rhetorical framing model, it identifies five thematic frames ranging from government incompetence to the normalization of civilian deaths.

The analysis shows that Bulama employs metonymy, parody, irony, and allegory to produce satire that is simultaneously comic and mournful, contributing to scholarship on multimodal political discourse in postcolonial Africa.

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Abstract

Cartoons, especially those that operate through satirical humour, are semiotic, rhetorical, and cognitive objects. They invite their audiences into a process of meaning-making that is inferential, perceptual, and ideologically positioned. This study analyses the varying multimodal frames discovered in the selected cartoon works of Mustapha Bulama that centres on the themes of maladministration and hardship in Nigeria. This study *aims* to identify, analyse, and interpret the semiotic, humorous, and rhetorical strategies through which these cartoon works critique governance failures and construct satirical meaning. It focuses on how the visual contents (and verbal components in the visual contents) generate humour and satirical formatives of government maladministration and hardship situations experienced by the citizenry in Nigeria. Five purposively selected cartoon images, drawn from Bulama's official Facebook page between January 1 and March 29, 2026, constitute the data corpus. Driven by Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) socio-semiotic model for visual analysis, Attardo's (1997) set-up incongruity resolution theory of humour, and Kuypers' (2010) model of rhetorical framing analysis, the study identified, analysed, and discussed five thematic frames namely: Government Incompetence and the Commodification of Apology; Democratic Betrayal and the Violation of the Citizens; Institutional Assassination of Democracy; Leadership as the Problem; and Institutional Normalisation of Civilians' Death. The findings reveal that Bulama's cartoons deploy metonymy, parody, compositional irony, and political allegory to generate satirical critique. The study concludes that political cartoons in the Nigerian context operate at the intersection of the comic and the elegiac, producing humour that is at once subversive, morally urgent, and consumed by grief. It contributes to the literature on multimodal political discourse in postcolonial African contexts.

De la mauvaise gouvernance et des difficultés :

Humour, satire et cadrages multimodaux dans les caricatures de Mustapha Bulama

Résumé

Les caricatures, en particulier celles qui opèrent par l'humour satirique, constituent des objets sémiotiques, rhétoriques et cognitifs. Elles invitent leur public à un processus de construction du sens qui est à la fois inférentiel, perceptif et idéologiquement situé. Cette étude analyse les divers cadres multimodaux présents dans une sélection d'œuvres caricaturales de Mustapha Bulama, centrées sur les thèmes de la mauvaise gouvernance et des difficultés socio-économiques au Nigeria. L'objectif principal est d'identifier, d'analyser et d'interpréter les stratégies sémiotiques, humoristiques et rhétoriques par lesquelles ces caricatures critiquent les défaillances gouvernementales et construisent un sens satirique. L'étude s'intéresse particulièrement à la manière dont les contenus visuels, ainsi que les composantes verbales qui y sont intégrées, génèrent de l'humour et des formes satiriques rendant compte de la mauvaise administration et des souffrances vécues par les citoyens nigérians.

Le corpus de données est constitué de cinq images caricaturales sélectionnées de manière raisonnée, tirées de la page Facebook officielle de Bulama entre le 1er janvier et le 29 mars 2026. L'analyse s'appuie sur trois cadres théoriques complémentaires : le modèle socio-sémiotique de l'analyse visuelle de Kress et van Leeuwen (1996), la théorie de l'incongruité-résolution de l'humour d'Attardo (1997), ainsi que le modèle d'analyse du cadrage rhétorique de Kuypers (2010).

L'étude dégage et discute cinq cadres thématiques majeurs : l'incompétence gouvernementale et la marchandisation de l'excuse ; la trahison démocratique et la violation des droits des citoyens ; l'assassinat institutionnel de la démocratie ; le leadership comme problème central ; et la normalisation institutionnelle de la mort des civils. Les résultats montrent que les caricatures de Bulama mobilisent la métonymie, la parodie, l'ironie compositionnelle et l'allégorie politique pour produire une critique satirique percutante.

L'étude conclut que la caricature politique, dans le contexte nigérian, se situe à l'intersection du comique et de l'élégiaque, produisant un humour à la fois subversif, moralement urgent et empreint de deuil. Cette recherche contribue ainsi à la littérature sur le discours politique multimodal dans les contextes africains postcoloniaux, en offrant un éclairage nouveau sur les fonctions sociales et rhétoriques de la satire visuelle face aux crises de gouvernance.

Mots clés : Caricature politique, Discours multimodal, Sémiotique sociale, Cadrage rhétorique, Satire et incongruité.

Introduction

Cartoons, as modes of social and political commentary, have long occupied a unique discursive space at the intersection of language, art, and ideology. Especially in settings pervaded by economic retrogression and governance failures, cartoons perform significant communicative functions as they reflect, frame, critique, and satirise social conditions through the structured deployment of image, text, and symbol. Meanwhile, the Nigerian contemporary political economy is characterised by institutional dysfunctions, persistent degradation of

citizens' welfare, and elite capture of public resources (Bamgbose, 2021). In addressing such menace, political cartoons serve dual purposes namely: they function as vehicles of critical dissent and as mechanisms of communal catharsis (Kulkarni, 2017). As Couder (2019) affirms, visual humour in political contexts operates as a sophisticated argumentative tool that mobilises shared cultural knowledge to make instructive political claims.

This study analyses five cartoon works of Mustapha Bulama, a Nigerian artist whose work has earned recognition for its incisive engagement with issues of good governance, anti-corruption, and social justice. With the turbulent Nigerian socio-political landscape in view, the paper explores how Bulama's visual texts construct, transmit, and contend meanings about maladministration and hardship through satire, humour, and multimodal semiotic strategies. As Nsungo (2021) puts it, these expressive resources enable cartoonists to say the unsayable and to speak truth to power through the indirection of comic representation.

In recent decades, the field of socio-semiotics has provided sophisticated tools for the analysis of such communication that integrates verbal, visual, spatial, and other semiotic resources to produce meaning. The foundational works of Halliday (1978) on the social semiotic theory of language and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) on the grammar of visual design extended the analytical vocabulary of semiotics to encompass the image in all its compositional complexity. Recent scholarship has also continued to expatiate and apply this tradition. Dewi (2022), for instance, deploy the semiotic model to analyse the conception of face masks between social and political messages in the covid-19 pandemic. Equally, Ajetunmobi and Imam (2022) investigated the use of humour, sarcasm, and rhetoric-induced (de)marketing of candidates in a Nigerian Presidential Primary election. Studies like the above and more confirm the productivity of socio-semiotic analysis for understanding the politically engaged visual text within Africa communicative contexts. What distinguishes the present study, however, is its tripartite theoretical structure.

However, existing multimodal discourse studies in Nigeria have largely focused on memes, election posters, and social media posts (Bamgbose, 2021; Ajetunmobi & Imam, 2022). Comparative limited attention has been paid to sustained cartoon corpora that span multiple governance crises within a defined temporal window. Similarly, few studies have brought together socio-semiotic visual grammar, cognitive humour theory, and rhetorical framing analysis within a single tripartite analytical apparatus. This study addresses these gaps by examining a corpus of five cartoons across a three-month period and combines all three frameworks to illuminate the multimodal construction of satirical meaning. What makes the present study distinct, however, is its tripartite theoretical structure. The study pursues three objectives namely: (i) to identify the thematic frames observed in Bulama's selected cartoon images; (ii) to analyse the multimodal, semiotic, humour-generating, and rhetorical strategies through which these frames are constructed; and (iii) to demonstrate how the three theoretical frameworks interact in producing a comprehensive account of political cartooning and humour generation in the Nigerian context.

1.Theoretical Foundations

Since cartoon images are multimodal texts, this study employs Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) socio-semiotic model for visual analysis to review the visual intricacies which manifest the frames in the selected images. The model identifies the grammatical substance embedded in the relation between visual designs and the meanings portrayed. It is founded on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) meta-functions in the Systemic Functional

Linguistics. Three types of meaning-making relations are highlighted namely: interactional, representational, and compositional, and these account for the meaning relations among visual elements. Interactional meaning relates to SFL's interpersonal meta-function which caters for how receptors' meaning conceptions are influenced and addressed by visual text markers. This implies that the truthfulness or otherwise of verbal texts to the beliefs and values communicated by the image is explored. Interestingly, point of view, social distance, and image are factors that contribute to the interactive/interpersonal meaning of images.

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) representational meta-function relates to the visual encoding of experiences or patterns of representation which can either be conceptual or narrative. Conceptual representational structures stratify participants in communicative discourses by relating them to a location (locative), depicting those who are not linked by visual elements (accompaniment), or presenting the mechanisms used in action processes (means). Conversely, narrative representational structures deal with ephemeral spatial configurations, emerging events and acts, and modifying processes — speech, actions, reactions, conversions, and mental activities. The third meaning-making function relates to SFL's textual meta-function. The compositional meaning accounts for how the placement of elements within an image foregrounds them (Tella, 2018). It entails the absence or presence of markers of juncture in a visual (framing), information value, and salience (sharpness, perspective, tonal contrast, and size). The socio-semiotic model of visual analysis is preferred in this study because it provides a holistic account of the exchanges between the written texts and images of multimodal texts, and identifies the engagement and relational processes among participants in images.

Attardo's (1997) set-up incongruity theory of humour is a cognitive theory that propels the conversations in Raskin's (1985) script-based theory of humour. Unlike in Raskin's where a text is categorised as joke-carrying when it's somewhat or totally similar with two separate scripts or when the similar scripts are overlapping, Attardo conceptualises humour as a feature of three ideas namely: set-up, incongruity, and resolution. Following Lee (2022), set-up is the textual position that generates humour. Incongruity refers to the conflict between the perceiver's assumptions of joke and the actual punch lines of the joke. Resolution is what happens after incongruity in the mind of the perceiver: it's a problem-solving cognitive exercise that harmonises the disparate components in a joke's core content. Moreover, the proposition of this theory is that incongruity is identified and processed when a hearer discovers the text of a joke. The interpretive session follows as the hearer puts bits of utterances in the joke in parallel to determine the explicature — intended perceptive interpretation, the potentially implied conclusions and premises (implicature), and the usage of observable contextual information to arrive at relevant interpretive outcomes for implicature and explicature (Yus, 2017). This study privileges the theory because it recognises the essentiality of socio-cognitive context in humour generation and its proposition is compatible with that of another theory in this study (rhetorical framing theory).

Kuypers' (2010) model of rhetorical framing analysis involves the study of communicators' choices from linguistic and other semiotic systems, and how these choices influence the decoders' interpretive efforts. Rhetorical framing is achieved through the focus on an aspect of an issue or text and the attribution of qualities to situation and social actors. Frames are highlighted by first identifying the themes and the social actors that propel those themes in a given text, and define how those themes or actors are framed. Interestingly, the role of contextual variables is important in determining themes and their frames. Entman

(1991) noted that rhetorical framing is dependent on the identification of such discourse properties as symbols, metaphors, concepts, visuals, labels, and keywords. This study prioritises the model of rhetorical framing analysis for it accentuates the salience of context in determining frames, communicative modes, and other linguistic items. Following Ajetunmobi and Imam (2022), frames identify problems, highlight causes, proffer solutions and review situations by prioritising some aspects of reality over others.

While each of the three frameworks performs distinct analytical function, their interaction is what makes the tripartite approach more powerful than a single theory could achieve independently. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual grammar provides the semiotic vocabulary for decoding compositional, representational, and interactional meaning in the cartoon images. Attardo's (1997) set-up incongruity theory of humour accounts for the cognitive mechanism through which humour is generated and processed and tracks the movement from set-up through incongruity to comic resolution. Kuypers' (2010) rhetorical framing model then situates this process within a political discourse context as it identifies how visual and verbal choices mobilise specific ideological frames. Together, the three frameworks stimulate a layered analysis that moves from the structural (what is in the cartoon images) to the cognitive (how it generates humour) to the rhetorical (what political work it performs).

2. Methodology

Five cartoon images created by Mustapha Bulama about maladministration and hardship in Nigeria between 1st January, 2026 to 29th March, 2026 constitute the data for this study. Mustapha Bulama is a Nigerian artist who specializes in the creation of political and social cartoons, and is passionate about anti-corruption, good governance, and social justice. The cartoon images are purposively selected and downloaded from the official Facebook page of *Bulama's Cartoons*. The selection was guided by three inclusion criteria namely: (i) the cartoon must engage explicitly with themes of governance failure, maladministration, or citizens' hardship; (ii) the cartoon must deploy multimodal features (the co-presence of verbal and visual elements) amenable to semiotic, humour, and rhetorical analysis; and (iii) the cartoon must have been published within 1 January to 29 March 2026. Cartoons that were purely verbal or lacked discernible political framing were excluded. The images are also ingrained in sarcastic, humorous, and metaphoric denotations. The inductive research approach is utilised to adequately comprehend the meanings held in the cartoon images and stimulate an evidence-based interpretive discussion. The frames observed are used as thematic categorisations of observations in the data. As previously mentioned, the analysis is based on three theoretical foundations namely: Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) socio-semiotic model for visual analysis, Attardo's (1997) set-up incongruity resolution theory of humour, and Kuypers' (2010) model of rhetorical framing analysis.

As the researcher is Nigerian, professionally engaged with linguistic and discourse studies, and culturally familiar with the socio-political contexts depicted in Bulama's cartoons, a brief positionality statement is necessary. The researcher's insider familiarity with Nigerian political culture, Hausa-Fulani symbolic registers, and the sociolinguistic contexts refected in these cartoons facilitates contextually rich interpretations. However, this proximity also carries the risk of over-identification with particular satirical framings. To mitigate this, the analysis is strictly dependent on the three theoretical frameworks described above, and the interpretive claims are grounded in semiotic and discursive evidences. The researcher acknowledges that the interpretations offered are theoretically mediated readings and surely,

not the only possible readings of these texts. In the absence of participant-generated data, conventional member-checking is not applicable to this study. Consequently, in keeping with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research, the study ensures credibility through theoretical triangulation (the application of three complementary frameworks), dependability (through transparent documentation of the analytical procedures), and confirmability (through anchoring interpretive claims on specific visual and verbal evidences from each cartoon image). These measures strengthen the rigour of the qualitative multimodal analysis.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis below presents the varying multimodal frames discovered in the selected cartoon works of Mustapha Bulama that centre on maladministration and hardship in Nigeria, published on the cartoonist's Facebook handle between January 1st, 2026 to March 29th, 2026. This section exemplifies how the visual contents (and verbal components in the visual contents) generate humour and satirical formatives of government maladministration and hardship situations experienced by the citizenry in Nigeria. The frames observed are used as thematic categorisations of observations in the data. Thus, five thematic frames are identified, analysed, and discussed in the following:

3.1 Government Incompetence and the Commodification of Apology

The definition of government incompetence here refers to the inability of government officials and institutions to effectively manage resources, perform their duties, and deliver essential services to the public. On the other hand, the commodification of apology is a conception where official public apologies are conceived to be performative strategic actions often used to minimise political damage, avoid legal liability, or manage reputation. This follows what Ajetunmobi and Imam (2022) called *problem, cause, and (absent) solution function*. Such function is reflected in Cartoon I (below) where Nigeria's electricity crisis is framed as a crisis of accountability and political will. By quoting the lexeme, apologies, Bulama rhetorically frames government apologies as hollow performative utterances and linguistic strategy deployed to manage public anger.

Cartoon I: When Apologies Start Powering Bulbs



There are three social actors above. The child is framed as the innocent suffering citizen who is uninformed of political realities and dependent on the parent (Dad) for basic needs. Her act of flicking the light switch portrays citizens as continually expecting social amenities they are constitutionally entitled to. The Dad (father) is framed as the disillusioned politically aware Nigerian adult who has internalised the futility of government promises. The third actors, the absent government officials, are framed through metonymic displacement as they are not visually present but are indexed through their 'apologies' (their rhetoric) and the kerosene lantern (their failure). The cartoon was motivated by the apologies made by Nigeria's Minister of Power, Mr Bayo Adelabu about the lack of electricity in almost all parts of the country.

Following Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) interactional meaning, the cartoon employs a medium social distance which places the viewer close enough to the characters to feel personal familiarity with their predicament. This closeness invites the audience into the domestic space of hardship which makes the energy feel intimate. Moreover, the dimly-lit background rendered in muted blues and yellows from the lantern's glow is an interpersonal cue that signals helplessness and deprivation. The father's furrowed brow and stern gaze create an acute image that compels the viewer to emotionally engage with his cynicism and frustration. Meanwhile, the cartoon also operates in 'the narrative representational and left-right informational structures' (Tella, 2018, p. 100). The child's flicking of the light switch is the main action vector that represents the persistent and naïve hope citizens still hold despite chronic power failure. The father's holding of the kerosene lantern is a reactive vector as his expression and posture are reactions to his daughter's questions. These two vectors establish a transactional relationship since the child's inquiry is met with the father's sardonic reaction. Interestingly, the kerosene lantern is symbolic as it serves as a classificatory tool which stratifies Nigeria among societies where modern infrastructural amenities remain aspirational but less functional. As a left-right informational form, the cartoon puts the child on the left to indicate the given, the familiar, or the existent problem of power outages while the father is placed on the right to represent the *new* or the satirical punch-line being communicated.

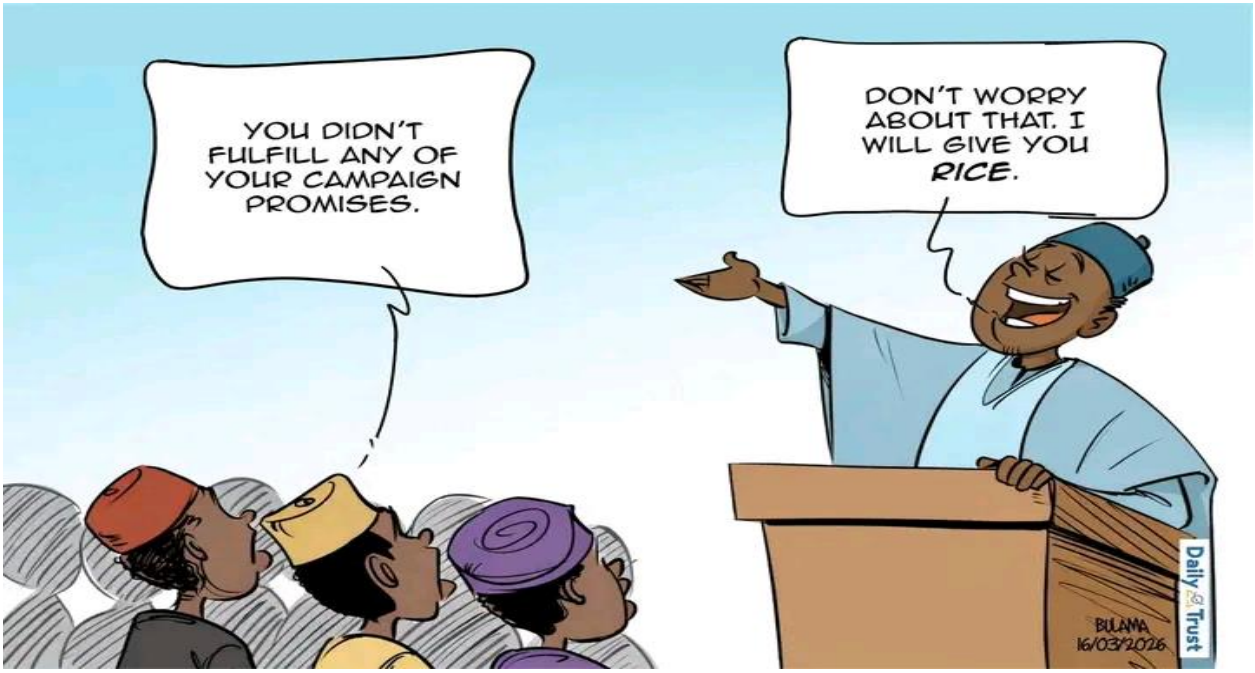
Equally, the speech squares are strategically placed at the top of the actors; this is to portray language as the primary meaning-making tool in the cartoon and grant the linguistic expressions some salience over the visual elements. In fact, the lantern's warm glow at the centre bottom compositionally accentuates the scenery in material poverty, and the surrounding darkness reveals the inadequacy of government response.

Following Entman (1991), several discourse properties activate the rhetorical frame namely: the kerosene lantern is a metaphor for regression which symbolises the government's failure to adopt lightening modernisation and the citizen's forced retreat to pre-modern coping mechanisms; the light switch is a metaphor for democratic expectation as citizens repeatedly switch on their trust in the government yet finds no power; darkness is a compositional symbol for both the existent electricity crisis and the opaqueness of governance in Nigeria; and 'apologies' is a rhetorical label that exposes the government's strategy of verbal pacification as a substitute for realistic service delivery. In addition, while the set-up is established by the child's innocent question: *Dad, when will the light come back?*, the incongruity emerges in his father's response: *when the apologies start powering bulbs*. The response violates the expected civic optimism or parental comfort. The father rather provides a sardonic counter-script entrenched in political cynicism. Also, the quotation marks engulfing *apologies* amplify the incongruity by emphasising the bureaucratic language that Nigerian politicians routinely deploy instead of realistic solutions. The humour coupled with the resolution occurs in the explicature and the implicature. While the explicature is that electricity remains unavailable, the implicature is that government apologies are insignificant as a substitute for functional public infrastructure.

3.2 Democratic Betrayal and the Violation of the Citizens

Democratic betrayal is the violation of mandate, trust, and moral principles by elected officials or political figures who prioritise self-aggrandisement, party loyalty, or personal ambition over the welfare of the citizens. Violation of the citizens occurs when democratic betrayal negatively impact citizens and it results in abuse of power, state capture, breach of mandate, or erosion of trust. These definitions capture the interpretation communicated by the cartoonist's news medium (Kuypers, 2010). The definition is reflected in Cartoon II where the Nigerian electoral system is framed as one where the social contract between elected officials and citizens is publicly and routinely violated, and where politicians confidently expect citizens to accept material tokens as substitutes for democratic governance. The politician's dismissal of campaign promises is framed as a normal transaction which the citizens are expected to accept without protests or resistance.

Cartoon II: I will give you Rice



Two social actors are seen in the above image. The politician is framed as the archetypal Nigerian political ace who is well-fed, well-dressed, constitutionally incapable of shame, and physically elevated. His babanriga and cap are symbols of Northern Nigerian political identity and places the satire within a given political and cultural geography. The second social actor, the crowd, is framed as politically abused, long-suffering electorate. While they are diverse in their head gears, they are unified in their grievance and vulnerability to tokenistic pacification. Meanwhile, though rice is not a social actor in the image but it is a symbol of democratic debasement which reduces citizens to consumers and governance to gift-giving. Its bold typography is a satirical logic that deflates it as pathetically inadequate.

With insights from Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) interactional meaning, the cartoon utilises the asymmetry of social distance and power between the two participant groups (Geise and Vigsø, 2017). The differential sizing in the rendering of the politician (larger, sharply defined) and the crowd (compressed, undifferentiated mass of heads) is a classic power vector in visual grammar. For instance, the politician's visual dominance through his open-armed gesture and broad smile encodes his structural authority over citizens. In fact, his ironic arrogance is reflected in his not looking directly at the citizens which makes him a mere actor in the diegetic space. By contrast, the crowd's low salience is a compositional choice made by the cartoonist as their faces are partially visible and their individualities are dissolved into collective anonymity. Moreover, the light blue background gives the setting of a public rally space which portrays the event as a formal civic moment turned grotesque. Further, the cartoon operates within a narrative transactional structure and the given-new structure as representational and compositional meanings respectively. The crowd's speech bubble is the reactive vector (which is a question directed at the politician) while the politician's response is the action vector (which reveals his deliberate redirection of accountability). The speech bubbles are also symmetrically placed to grant compositional salience to the utterances and frame the citizen's complaint and the politician's deflection as equally weighted in the public discourse. The podium serves as a physical and institutional symbol of political authority which encodes elevation, distance, and officialdom. Interestingly, the podium edge and the compressed space are framing lines that physically demarcate the boundary between those

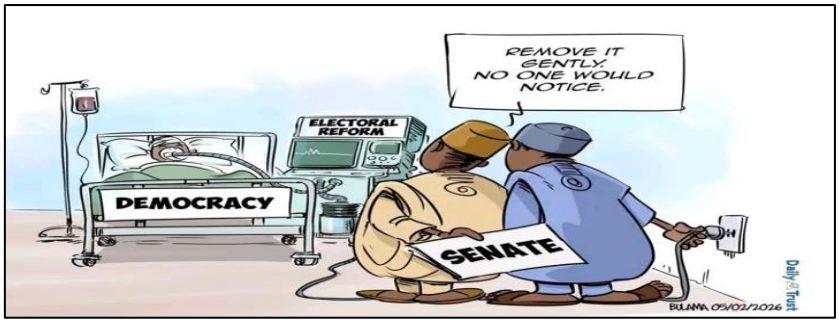
who are governed and those who govern. Similarly, the image's composition puts the crowd on the left (which represents the known reality of unfulfilled promises and citizen grievance) and the politician on the right (which represents the new, the cartoon's satirical punch-line). While the crowd is relegated to the left margin to reinforce their political marginalisation, the podium is centred right to affirm institutional power in the dominant visual zone. Also, the bold typography of RICE is an essential narrative process of conversion which transforms what should be a comprehensive governance response into a single reductive commodity. Rice in Nigerian politics is symbolically a well-established metonym for vote-buying and the reduction of democratic citizenship to immediate material gratification.

Meanwhile, the set-up is activated by the crowd's inquiry: *You didn't fulfil any of your campaign promises*. This statement scripts the democratic norm where citizens hold elected officials responsible for pre-election commitments. The set-up is politically charged but cognitively familiar; it is a situation of democratic expectation and civic confrontation. The incongruity erupts in the politician's response: *Don't worry about that. I will give you RICE*. The form of incongruity discovered in this cartoon image is cognitive, attitudinal, and linguistic. For instance, the non-sequitur between campaign promises and a bag of rice creates a jarring cognitive dissonance. The politician's cheerful unbothered demeanour is wholly disproportionate to the gravity of the accusation. The sentence, *Don't worry about that*, dismisses democratic accountability as trivial while the emphasis on RICE inflates the absurdity of his counter-offer as if rice is a legitimate substitute for governance. The resolution is achieved when the audience decodes the explicature and implicature. The former is that the politician is offering rice instead of accountable governance, and the latter is that Nigerian politicians distribute food items, rice especially, during election seasons as a strategy to pacify voters and circumvent substantive accountability. While the resolution is humorous and damning, it produces laughter born of painful recognition.

3.3 Institutional Assassination of Democracy

Here, institutional assassination of democracy refers to the systemic and deliberate dismantling of democratic norms and principles. It involves weakening institutions such as the media, the judiciary, and the electoral bodies to create an authoritarian structure and erode public trust. The semantic extension of this definition is enacted in one of the cartoons through the life-support imagery. Democracy is framed as a critically-ill patient dependent on external institutional mechanisms for survival. This infers that without legislative protection; Nigerian democracy remains vulnerable to those who control its life-support systems. The image is presented in the following:

Cartoon III: Remove it gently



In the image above, a hospital room setting is presented where a patient, *Democracy,* lies on a bed and connected to life-support equipment. As a social actor, democracy is framed

as a passive incapacitated victim who is hospitalised, oxygen-masked, sedated, and unable to defend itself. This rhetorical move makes democratic deterioration morally equivalent to murder and this triggers ethical and emotional elicitations that mere abstract political commentaries cannot achieve. The Senate is another social actor framed as the covert institutional assassin within the democratic structure. The label, SENATE, ensures that the institutional indictment is unambiguous and explicit to truncate satirical deniability that anonymity might otherwise afford. The third social actor is the electoral reform framed as the sole life-support mechanism of Nigerian democracy. Its monitor's near-flatline reading visually encodes how precarious this mechanism already is before the plug is even pulled. Meanwhile, the absent public is implicitly framed through the assertion: *no one would notice*. Here, citizens are framed as disempowered, inattentive, and complicit through inaction. In addition, certain symbols and metaphors are utilised in the cartoon namely: the hospital and life-support apparatus are institutional metaphors that transforms democratic governance into a medical emergency to make abstract political deterioration emotionally and viscerally concrete; the wall socket and plug are metaphors of institutional control held by those in political power; the IV blood drip is a symbol of democratic sustenance which conveys the idea that democracy is haemorrhaging and requires constant transfusion to survive. The conspiratorial huddle is a visual symbol of collusion which encodes the Senate's coordinated anti-democratic actions. Importantly, the rhetorical label, "*Remove it gently. No one would notice*" represents stealth, impunity, and elite contempt for democratic accountability.

Further, the cartoon is replete with Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) interactional, compositional, and representational meanings. The cartoon deploys a voyeuristic oblique medium-close viewing positioning which portrays the audience as a silent invisible witness to institutional murder which creates a satirical outrage and moral discomfort. Similarly, the dim clinical colour palette evokes the institutional atmosphere of a hospital; this particularly lends the scene a veneer of procedural normalcy that makes the unplugging more terrifying. The oxygen-mask on the democracy-patient, the IV drip of blood, and the beeping monitor create an interpersonal affective appeal to invite the audience to feel the anger and grief on behalf of the dying patient. While the composition of the image follows an ideal-real vertical structure, it is structured around richly layered narrative transactional process. The two-senate figures are the actors and their reaching toward the plug is the action vector which is the central narrative event. The two-senate figures and the wall socket are placed at the right side to represent the emerging, revelatory action that the cartoon exposes. On the other hand, the democracy-patient is the goal of the action and it's placed at the left centre to represent what currently exists. The wall socket is also placed at the far-right edge to represent the terminus, the point at which life ends.

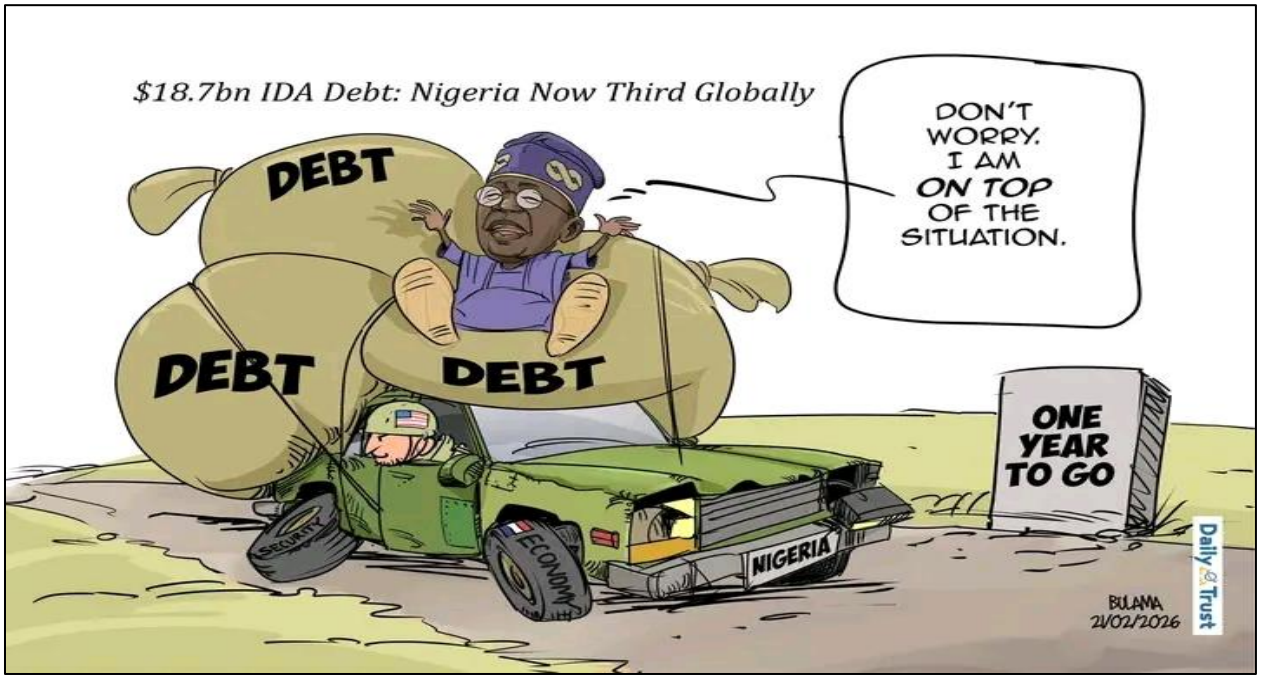
Following Lee (2022), the set-up is the hospital life support scene, a setting of a medical care system. The cognitive schema of the audience activates expectations of the sanctity of life, medical ethics, and the duty of care. Equally, the political labels, SENATE, DEMOCRACY, and ELECTORAL REFORM transpose the medical script onto a governance script to signify a political allegory. Thus, there is an expected collision of the parallel scripts namely: the medical and the political. The incongruity emerges in the statement: *Remove it gently. No one would notice.* The utterance transforms the figures from life-savers to murderers and frames the Nigerian Senate as the covert assassin of democracy itself. In fact, the statement, *no one would notice,* introduces a meta-incongruity that citizens are too disempowered, too exhausted, and too inattentive to observe or resist the attempted destruction of the democratic infrastructure. This is a theoretically derived observation:

framed through Kuypers' (2010) rhetorical framing model, the statement constitutes an act of institutional arrogance encoded as a rhetorical label, and a sobering commentary on civic engagement. Following Yus' (2017) interpretive outcomes for explicature and implicature, the Senate's unplugging democracy's life support is the explicature while the implicature is that the electoral reform is the only remaining mechanism keeping Nigerian democracy alive, and that Nigerian legislators are working to eliminate it. Therefore, the humour turns into a deeply unsettling catharsis as laughter disappears almost immediately and turns into civic alarm.

3.4 Leadership as the problem

This refers to the situation were organisational failures, lack of progress, or low morale stem directly from the actions, inactions, or behaviours of those in authority. With this definition in mind, Bulama creates an inversion of the political frame in which leadership represents progress, uplift, and national direction. The framing shows that the very presence of the leader on the national vehicle constitutes an unbearable load, and transforms the conventional narrative of presidential stewardship into one of presidential dead weight.

Cartoon IV: One Year to Go



In the image above, the political figure (President Tinubu) is framed as the architect and embodiment of national debt. His caricature features and signature cap makes the indictment personal. His smile and reassuring gesture frame him as knowingly dishonest. The Nigerian state (the vehicle) is framed as a broken barely-functional, overburdened institution. Its military aesthetic paints it as a state under existential threat and its multiple sectoral labels (Economy, Security) encrypt the pervading cross-domain governmental failure. Debt as inscribed on three enormous bags is a physical, crushing, visible force that is materially destroying national infrastructure. In fact, the triple repetition accentuates inescapability and accumulation. The soldier-driver is an institutional apparatus of the state which conveys the notion of institutional resilience crushed by political mismanagement. The electorate and the civil society are implied through the inscription: *One Year to Go*; this indicates that democratic accountability is the only mechanism for relief and it reminds us of the ticking clock formative which indicates urgency.

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) meaning-making relations are demonstrated in the cartoon. For interactional meaning, the cartoon utilises the low-angle medium-distance visual positioning that both exposes the crushing weight bearing down on the vehicle and elevates the debt-laden figure. The visual angle portrays the political figure's (President Tinubu) supposed self-importance and autocratic dominance; he literally and symbolically sits on everything to make the viewer appreciate the destructive load he represents. His wide grin, relaxed posture, and raised arm are direct rhetorical engagements that indicate performative reassurance; his address to an abstract crowd makes the audience the target of his hollow comfort. Interestingly, the cartoon's main interactional irony is President Tinubu's physical comfort atop crushing debt. The overloaded, visibly strained, battered vehicle possesses an affective interpersonal appeal that begs for viewers' sympathy for the Nigerian state. Under representational meaning, the political figure (President Tinubu) is both an actor and a load. The vehicle is the goal of the crushing action and the debt bags are circumstantial attributes of means and accompaniment. This suggests the idea that debt and leadership (this particular figure − President Tinubu) are structurally related. Moreover, the headline text, *$18.7bn IDA Debt: Nigeria Now Third Globally*, functions as an anchoring verbal element that fixes the cartoon's polysemic visual elements to a specific, current political reality. Meanwhile, the cartoon's composition is structured around a vertical hierarchy where the political figure (President Tinubu) occupies the ideal zone above (the position of leadership) and the crushed vehicle occupies the real zone below (actual governance outcomes). Thus, the cartoon's compositional argument is the vertical opposition between ideal leadership rhetoric and real governance consequences. Importantly, the three debt bags are the main visual fields in the cartoon as their scales are disproportionate to everything else in the frame. This portrays the debts as the all-consuming, overwhelming reality of Nigerian governance. Intersetingly, their spherical, balloon-like forms can be interpreted as both inflation (economic) and suffocation (civic). The cartoon's closing punch-line, ONE YEAR TO GO is compositionally placed at the far right as a form of revelation. While it anchors the temporal urgency of the satire, the headline, *$18.7bn IDA Debt: Nigeria Now Third Globally,* sits above the entire scene to emphasise the visual allegory in documentary reality.

Moreover, the cartoon's set-up operates on both visual and verbal registers. Visually, there is the scenario of the obvious, visible crisis, and verbally, the headline emphasises the factual gravity of Nigeria's debt position: third largest IDA debtor globally. Both registers stimulate the crisis script namely: the leadership of a nation in severe debt is expected to express concern, urgency, acknowledgement of severity, or remedial action. Moreover, President Tinubu's (the political figure) physical position deepens the set-up with darkly comic precision; his seating on the problem is visual evidence of his complicity and obliviousness in the crisis. Meanwhile, the observed incongruity is tonal, temporal, and metaphorical as depicted in the speech bubble: *Don't worry. I am ON TOP OF THE SITUATION*.

3.5 Institutional Normalisation of Civilians' Death

This refers to the process by which governmental, military, or international organisations treat civilian fatalities in a particular country or community as an expected, acceptable, or unavoidable cost of conflict. Such deaths are rather managed through technical reports instead of being treated as critical moral ruptures. Bulama accentuates this definition by portraying the situation in Nigeria as the practice of embedding civilians' death into operational expectations and a failure of policy and morality.

Cartoon V: On your Man's Death We shall Stand



In the image above, two animal characters (resembling a goat and a camel), both wearing military helmets and standing in a grassy outdoor setting, are depicted. The smaller animal (goat) is framed as the conscience of the institution. It is the voice that reports casualties, registers shock, and expects a meaningful response. Its small size depicts its marginalisation within institutional discourse, and this suggests that the voice of accountability is less powerful, smaller, and ineffective compared to the institutional culture of indifference. The larger animal (camel) is framed as the image of institutional apathy. It is large, more powerful, representative of the dominant institutional response, but utterly disengaged from the moral weight of the crisis. The musical symbols attached to its speech bubble convey that it is actively performative in its indifference; it doesn't only stay silent in the face of death, it sings. While the 200 civilians killed are absent, their visually unrepresented but reported deaths depict institutional invisibility. Similarly, the Nigerian state and the adapted anthem: *On your man's death…* are framed as corrupt civic symbols. Since the anthem is an adaptation of *on your mandate we shall stand…* used to eulogise the Nigerian President and assure him of political support, it affirms the unwitting confession of institutional complicity in civilians' death.

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) interactional, representational, and compositional meanings are demonstrated in this cartoon. An eye-level horizontal positioning is deployed and it is rhetorically significant. It portrays the audience as a casual observer of a conversation between two peers and frames the exchange as a mundane and ordinary conversation which ultimately deepens the satirical horror of its content. The casualness of the interlocution (two animals chatting in a field) utterly contrasts the seriousness of the topic: mass civilians' death during a sacred month. Interestingly, the military helmets on both animal characters constitute an extended institutional paradox which simultaneously encodes a form of absurdist performative militarism (field creatures dressed for war yet not engaged in protecting anyone) and signals awareness of conflict. The animals' helmets are demand markers that challenge the audience investigate who is supposed to defend Nigerian civilians from violence and death. In fact, the camel's half-closed eyes and singing posture portrays deliberate and conscious indifference; this makes the interactional meaning a formative of

institutional apathy seen as normalcy. For representational meaning, the cartoon operates through a narrative conversational structure. Two reactive vectors in dialogue with no action vector act on the crisis being discussed; this absence is the cartoon's most devastating representational choice. Since the crisis exists only in language with no action directed towards it, this means institutional response to civilian massacres has been reduced to words that go nowhere. Meanwhile, Bulama utilises the conceptual classificatory substitution (by replacing human actors with animal characters) to assert that the response of Nigerian security and political institutions to civilian deaths has worsened below the threshold of human accountability. As the animals represent the institutions and actors, the ambiguity in their species denotes the generality of institutional failure and doesn't target a specific agency. In addition, the musical notes floating from the singing camel are narrative symbolic elements. As music is conventionally associated with celebration, it portrays tone-deaf institutional response here and reiterates that the singing of an adapted but corrupted political anthem in the face of mass death transforms what should be a solemn accountability moment into a scene of oblivious, grotesque performance. Moreover, the composition of the cartoon, like others, follows the left-right given-new structure. The small animal on the left (who presents the factual report of deaths) represents the given, known, and established realities of civilian casualties. The large animal on the right represents the cartoon's revelatory and satirical punch-line. The grassy sunlit outdoor setting creates a peaceful, deceptively pastoral, and visual environment and is a compositional irony that deepens the horror of the conversation's content.

The set-up in this cartoon is portrayed in the statement: *Did you hear? More than 200 People have been killed since Ramadan began*. This introduces a serious humanitarian crisis script; a response of grief, alarm, a call to institutional action, or urgency is expected rather than musical notes. In fact, the Ramadan context stimulates an air of sacred temporality as violence during the holy month carries a moral weight and deepens the expectation of a solemn and appropriate response. Equally, the military helmets on both animal actors reinforce the set-up by emphasising institutional identity; the animal interlocutors are actors with security responsibilities and this makes the expectation of a remedial or protective response stronger.

The incongruity erupts from the singing response: *on your man's death we shall stand (x2)*. This is an unmistakable parody of Nigerian President Bola Tinubu's campaign song: *on your mandate we shall stand (x2)* with the word *mandate* replaced by *man's death*. This substitution operates as a multi-layered incongruity. First, it is a form of linguistic incongruity as it transforms a pledge of political support into a mordant confession of institutional complicity; the politicians do not stand on the mandate of the President only but also on the death of its citizens. Second, it is also a form of institutional incongruity as the singing of a corrupted campaign song during Ramadan in response to civilians' deaths, violates every register of appropriate institutional response namely: the civic, the sacred, and the humanitarian. Third, species incongruity is also existent as animals singing a corrupted campaign song about human deaths compound the absurdity and it portrays institutional actors as having forfeited their human and humane standing.

Meanwhile, the resolution is achieved through the audience's recognition of the campaign song parody and its implicature. The explicature is that a security figure responds to the news of mass civilian deaths by singing. The implicature is that Nigerian security institutions have become so habituated to civilian casualties that death has been normalised.

This resolution produces humour that is almost overwhelmed by moral horror. Interestingly, the socio-cognitive context (knowledge of Nigeria's political interplay, awareness of the security crisis in the country, and the specific Ramadan duration) is absolutely essential to the resolution's full satirical force.

4. Discussion

The five thematic frames identified across Bulama's cartoons collectively reveal a coherent satirical assertion namely: the systematic exposure of governance failure is a normalised, multi-dimensional crisis. The cartoons do not merely represent political dysfunction; they construct it as a morally actionable indictment by deploying multimodal resources to produce emotional, cognitive, and ideological effects.

The analysis confirms the productive complementarity of the three frameworks. The socio-semiotic visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) provides the structural inventory of meaning-making resources; Attardo's (1997) incongruity-resolution framework traces the cognitive pathway from satirical set-up through incongruity to the production of humorous resolution; and Kuypers' (2010) rhetorical framing model situates the entire process within a political discourse ecology in which specific frames are activated, sustained, and attributed to social actors. The three frameworks are both additive and mutually clarifying. The rhetorical label (Entman, 1991) that activates a frame is also a source of incongruity (Attardo, 1997) and an element of compositional salience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996); this demonstrates that the visual, the cognitive, and the rhetorical are inseparable in political cartooning systems.

Meanwhile, the study's most striking finding is the elegiac dimension of these satirical texts. As the analysis reveals, the cartoons do not conclude in simple comic relief. Instead, they produce a form of grieving laughter; what may be termed *cathartic satire* where humour is consumed by moral horror (Cartoon III, V) or replaced by a sense of civic urgency (Cartoon IV). This quality, which operates at "the intersection of the comic and the elegiac," distinguishes Bulama's cartooning from purely lucid satire but aligns it with a broader tradition of postcolonial political art in which laughter becomes an instrument of communal mourning.

Interestingly, the findings in this study corroborates Tella's (2018) and Ajetunmobi and Imam's (2022) studies of the 2015 Nigerian presidential election memes and the rhetoric-induced demarketing in a Nigerian presidential primary election respectively. The former demonstrated that humour in Nigerian political visual texts functions to expose power asymmetries and mobilise civic sentiment while the latter accentuates that humorous political memes do not only create humour but they also perform communicative cum cognitive purposes of framing political actors. However, the present study diverges from duo in two significant aspects. First, where Tella's and Ajetunmobi and Imam's memes operated primarily within a short-term electoral context, Bulama's cartoons engage with structural and persistent governance failures and aver that political cartooning in Nigeria has evolved into a sustained longitudinal form of satirical journalism. Second, Tella's (2018) and Ajetunmobi and Imam's (2022) analytical framework both foreground compositional and humour-theoretic dimensions while the tripartite framework employed here additionally integrates Kuypers' (2010) rhetorical framing model and creates a more politically specific account of how satirical meaning is institutionally framed and directed. Like Bamgbose (2021), the study

also amplifies the propositional resources of socio-semiotic theory of multimodality and incongruity.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined visual and verbal realisations of cartoon images created by Mustapha Bulama about maladministration and hardship in Nigeria between 1st January, 2026 to 29th March, 2026. The foundational propositions are that cartoon images are multimodal pieces ingrained in sarcastic, humorous, and metaphoric denotations and their conceptualisation of maladministration and hardship ravaging the Nigerian populace amplifies their semiotic significance. The constructed frames are discussed under five thematic categorisations namely: Government Incompetence and the Commodification of Apology, Democratic Betrayal and the Violation of the Citizens, Institutional Assassination of Democracy, Leadership as the Problem, and Institutional Normalisation of Civilians' Death. This study establishes that cartoons are tools for the production of satirical pieces that operate at the intersection of the comic and the elegiac, and it generates humour that is consumed by grief and moral scourge. Interestingly, the three theories and models used in the analysis presents cartoon images as moral documents and pieces transcendent over mere topical satire.

The study's theoretical contribution affirms that the tripartite analytical apparatus of socio-semiotic visual grammar, incongruity-resolution theory, and rhetorical framing analysis is not only applicable but also analytically productive in the study of political cartooning in postcolonial African contexts. The convergence of these three frameworks enables a reading of cartoons that is structural, cognitive, and political.

Future studies may explore comparative cross-national examination of West African political cartooning as this would allow for the identification of pan-regional satirical conventions and context-specific variations. Similarly, reader-response studies incorporating audience reception data would complement the text-centred focus of the present analysis and it will address the limitation of the study's exclusive reliance on the researcher's interpretive position. Equally, corpus-based approaches to larger cartoon archives would permit both quantitative and qualitative analysis and enable better generalisations about longitudinal trends in Nigerian political satire. Importantly, the application of the tripartite framework to other African cartooning traditions, especially, those in conflict zones such as Sudan, Ethiopia, the Sahel, and even non-African contexts like America, Iran, Syria, Israel, and Palestine, would test the cross-contextual validity of the analytical model developed here. In fact, this study further buttresses the assertions of Targema et al (2026) on the significance of digital age cartoons as a socio-political discursive tool and Bulama as a revered authority in this niche.

6. Limitations

While this study setting is Nigeria, the theoretical foundations and analytical discussions have extensively contributed to the broad field of political semiotics. However, there are no studies without limitations. First, this study is largely premised on the interpretivism approach with insights from rhetorical and semiotic theories; thus, it can be critiqued for its subjectivity. Second, the interpretations given to each cartoon may be different from the intent of the cartoonist; however, however, the analysis maintains strict fidelity to theoretical propositions to aid factual scholarly submissions. Third, the three-month data window, while thematically rich, is relatively brief and may not be representative of long-term patterns in

Bulama's satirical output. Fourth, the study does not incorporate audience reception data; the readings offered reflect the researcher's theoretically mediated interpretations and cannot be assumed to represent how actual audiences process these cartoons. Fifth, the study does not complement the qualitative multimodal analysis with a quantitative content analysis which may have provided additional rigour in the identification and frequency of rhetorical frames. Sixth, the corpus is restricted to a single cartoonist and this restriction limits the generalisability of the findings across Nigerian political cartooning landscape.

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