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Religious Frames in Tanzania's 2020 General Elections Coverage

Emmanuel Ngabo[1], *Dotto P. Kuhenga*[2]

Abstract

This study examines religious framing in the newspaper coverage of Tanzania's 2020 general elections. The objectives are to assess the extent of religious rhetoric and to identify the dominant types of religious frames. The study used a mixed-methods approach to analyse front-page news stories from three leading Kiswahili newspapers: Habari Leo, Mwananchi, and Nipashe, published from August to October 2020. This involved quantitative content analysis of 518 news stories and 19 for qualitative analysis. The Framing Theory, operationalised through the Media Framing Analysis (MFA) framework, enabled a systematic identification of existing religious news frames in the election news. The findings indicate that 23.6% of election news stories contained religious references, indicating that religion served as a significant interpretive lens. Three dominant frames emerge: divine legitimacy, portraying the incumbent John Magufuli as a God-fearing leader; divine peace, linking national stability and unity to prayers and fasting; and moralised fear, depicting the incumbent as a moral compass while casting opposition candidates as risks. The study's findings call for further examination of the role of religion in the media framing of subsequent election campaigns, particularly that of President Samia Suluhu Hassan, with special attention to the ethical boundaries between faith, media discourse, and democratic competition in Tanzania.

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[1] School of Journalism and Mass Communication | University of Dar es Salaam | Ngabo.emmanuel@udsm.ac.tz

[2] School of Journalism and Mass Communication | University of Dar es Salaam | kuhenga@udsm.ac.tz

1. Introduction

Elections play a central role in democracy as they facilitate political competition, encourage citizen participation and serve as mechanisms for government accountability (Lindberg, 2006; Ojukwu et al., 2019; Norris & Grömping, 2019). In elections, the mass media play a pivotal role in informing the public, constructing electoral narratives, and shaping discourse around democratic values, procedures, and practices (Holbert, 2005; Strömbäck, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; De Vreese et al., 2001; Jatula, 2020). Indeed, the media do not transmit political messages neutrally; rather, they actively intervene in political communication processes (Esser, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008) and, in doing so, often frame news in interaction with external actors seeking to influence it (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2010). News media play a critical role in shaping electoral campaigns by framing political narratives and influencing public perception (Hassan & Javed, 2025). Media framing shapes how citizens perceive political actors, assess democratic institutions, and engage in electoral processes. In contemporary politics, religion has emerged as a significant factor in shaping electoral narratives, with campaign strategies that draw on religious or ethnic identities increasingly common (Charles, 2017), raising concerns about divisive rhetoric that may destabilise interfaith relations (Gahnstroem, 2012).

To begin with, the 2020 general elections in Tanzania, the sixth since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992, took place within a restrictive media environment in which independent journalism faced significant legal and institutional constraints (Chikohomero & Mjenga, 2020; Paget, 2021; Kapilima, 2023). Paget (2021) argues that the ruling party in Tanzania used state ownership of media outlets and state regulatory powers over the media to guarantee itself favourable coverage. The elections were held as incumbent John Pombe Magufuli (CCM) sought re-election for his second and final term under the country's constitution, with Tundu Antipas Lissu (CHADEMA) as his main rival. Constraints on free speech marked Magufuli's first term, including restrictions on independent media and public political gatherings. However, Magufuli's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, including rejecting lockdowns, promoting faith-based healing and advocating traditional remedies over globally endorsed vaccines, resonated well with many citizens, highlighting the intersection of religion and politics in shaping public perceptions of leadership (Pipkin, 2022; Kessy & Ndumbaro, 2025; Mutebi, 2026).

Meanwhile, various studies show that religion emerges as a significant factor in shaping electoral narratives. As argued, campaign strategies that draw on religious or ethnic identities are increasingly common (Charles, 2017). In Tanzania, Msagalla (2024), for instance, examined metaphorical language in Tanzania's political discourse, establishing that in the National Assembly, an MP (referring to Kangi Lugola, a member of parliament for Mwibala constituency since 2010, as he compared Magufuli to Jesus) strategically deployed metaphorical analogy during parliamentary debates to strengthen arguments to influence parliamentary or government political decisions. Meanwhile, Mfinanga et al. (2018) pointed out that religious leaders should act as unifying agents rather than reinforcing social divisions, while politicians should refrain from instrumentalising religion for partisan purposes. Studies emphasise the need to carefully balance religion and politics to ensure that faith provides moral guidance and fosters civic responsibility without being manipulated for political gain (Smythe, 2024). Against this backdrop, this study assesses the extent to which the three newspapers used religious framing in their 2020 general elections news reporting and determines the most prevalent religious frames.

Globally, numerous studies focus on the role of media framing in elections, highlighting its effect on public trust in democratic institutions. Asghar et al. (2019) demonstrate that partisan media narratives deepen polarisation, undermining confidence in electoral outcomes. Likewise, DuBosar (2022) shows that framing strategies in the US elections contribute to ideological entrenchment and scepticism towards electoral institutions. Meanwhile, Li et al. (2024) treat the online formation of conspiracy theories as a socially emergent process, whereas Frischlich et al. (2023) document the interplay among media framing, misinformation, and declining trust in democratic processes.

Studies in Africa demonstrate that the media often operate under significant political pressure, undermining their independence in election coverage. Pitts (2000) found that due to political interference, both state and private media struggled to function autonomously. Jinmi-Ahisu and Osah (2021) note that in Nigeria, newspapers employed strategic metaphors that could inflame political tensions. Meanwhile, Demuyakor and Abdul-Rahaman (2022) highlight that Ghanaian election coverage frequently aligned with partisan interests rather than serving as an independent democratic institution.

Meanwhile, religious authorities and institutions play an important role in shaping beliefs about political legitimacy. Rubin (2025) argues that religious authorities and institutions are particularly adept at fostering legitimacy beliefs, especially within the Abrahamic monotheistic faiths. George W. Bush was extremely public about his faith and presented himself as an evangelical Christian, which allowed him to connect with deeply religious and conservative Americans who formed the core of his political base (Gonzalez, 2012). Meanwhile, both opponents and supporters of Donald Trump see him in a religious frame, either as a dangerous authoritarian leader or a messianic saviour (Crockford, 2023).

In Nigeria, Jinmi-Ahisu and Osah (2021) argue that some politicians, public officers, religious figures, and ethnic jingoists spread hate messages during and after elections in both traditional and social media in the form of campaign advertisements, slogans, and verbal expressions. Meanwhile, a study in Uganda highlights the duality of religious leaders' roles in elections, critiquing and legitimising, where Alava and Ssentongo (2018) contend that during Uganda's 2016 elections, religious leaders both criticised and legitimised the incumbent Yoweri Museveni's leadership. Clerics who framed Museveni as divinely chosen reinforced his moral legitimacy, while others used faith-based rhetoric to question aspects of his rule, illustrating the complex interplay between religion, morality and political legitimacy.

The Herald published an article in Zimbabwe titled 'Looking Back: Carry your own cross-Moyo tells looters' (Mpofu et al., 2022). According to Mpofu et al. (2022), the biblical metaphor in that news story reminded readers that Moyo was attempting to evade the law, having previously condemned similar attempts by another politician, and that it would resonate with Zimbabwe's relatively Christian readership. Isiko's (2019) observation in Uganda established the centrality of faith-based organisations and Pentecostal churches in constructing President Museveni's political legitimacy. Gruenbaum (2020) points out that Tanzania's president, John Magufuli, looked to 'prayer and snake oil' to fight the pandemic, the Institute for Security Studies said, after he claimed Christian rituals killed the coronavirus, then sent a plane to collect an herbal potion touted by the Madagascan president (Lusekelo, 2023). The messianic variant of civilian Bonapartism best describes the Magufuli phenomenon. Messianic Bonapartism is ruled by the leader's fiat. It legitimises its rule not only through material measures in the interests of the downtrodden

or oppressed (called wanyonge in Tanzania) but also through metaphysical appeals (Shivji, 2021; Lusekelo, 2023).

Tanzania provides a pertinent context for exploring the nexus between religion and electoral framing. Although no political party is formally aligned with a religious identity in Tanzania's secular nation-state, historical patterns reveal the strategic use of religious labelling. Babeiya (2012), for example, noted that in the 2000 and 2005 elections, the Civic United Front (CUF) attracted a Muslim party label. In contrast, the 2010 polls associated the opposition party, Chama Cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA), with Catholicism, and its presidential candidate, Willibrod Slaa, was labelled 'the priest'. The ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)'s 2005 manifesto includes provisions to establish a Kadhi (Qadi's) Court. This specialised judicial body adjudicates matters of Islamic law (Sharia), primarily focusing on personal and family status, and steps to join the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), reflecting attempts to leverage religious sentiment in politics (Makulilo, 2012). Mkenda (2011) cautions that unchecked religious acrimony in Tanzania could influence future elections, potentially undermining the culture of peace.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) and applies the Media Framing Analysis (MFA) framework from Giles and Shaw (2009). MFA itself builds on Entman (1991, 1993), Van Gorp (2007), and other framing studies to systematically analyse media frames. Meanwhile, framing theory originates with Gregory Bateson (1972), who introduced the concept of psychological frames as cognitive structures that guide how individuals interpret reality. The theory was later systematised by Erving Goffman (1974) in Frame Analysis, where he argued that people rely on mental frameworks, or 'frames,' to organise and interpret social experiences. The integration of framing into media and communication research was advanced by Gamson and Modigliani (1989), who described media discourse as interpretative packages that shape public understanding of political and social issues, as demonstrated in their study of U.S. newspaper coverage of nuclear energy.

Entman (1993) refined the concept by defining framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication, and by identifying four major functions of framing in news:

problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Building on these foundations, later scholars expanded research on framing in political communication. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) showed the press's tendency to focus on conflict rather than consensus, while Scheufele (2004) distinguished between frame building (how media actors construct frames) and frame setting (how audiences interpret them). Chong and Druckman (2007) also highlighted the concept of competitive framing, in which multiple frames compete to dominate public discourse. More recent studies have applied Framing Theory to evolving media environments and electoral contexts. Brüggemann and D'Angelo (2018) examined how framing processes have become more dynamic in the digital media landscape, while McMenamin et al. (2013) argue that the framing of elections represents the most overt instance of the media's power to influence politics. Ani et al. (2017) argue that, among others, media frames of issues of public interest should develop constructive discourse on electioneering in Nigeria to shape the framework for policy development.

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research (MMR) approach to examine how the legacy newspapers in Tanzania framed the 2020 general elections. The research integrated quantitative content analysis of 518 front-page election news stories from the *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi,* and *Nipashe* dailies (published between August 26 and October 31, 2020) to assess the extent to which religious references were used in the election news, and qualitative analysis of 19 news stories that specifically framed election news in terms of religious rhetoric to determine the types of prevalent religious frames. These three newspapers are leading Kiswahili newspapers, and their combined readership and impact command attention in Tanzania. *Habari Leo* is a government newspaper, whereas *Nipashe* and *Mwananchi* are privately owned daily tabloids. The three newspapers were selected for comparative purposes, not only to contrast government and private ownership but also to examine any differences among privately owned newspapers. An explanatory sequential design was adopted, whereby initial quantitative findings informed the selection of news stories with religious frames, the preparation of instruments for qualitative data collection, and the subsequent qualitative analysis, which was used to explain the numbers and effectively establish the religious frames employed in the news and their directions. This allowed a nuanced

understanding of framing patterns and practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The following frame variables guided the coding process:

Table 5: Code sheet for religious frames analysis of the 2020 general elections news

CODESHEET Version 2: 29 January 2024 The unit of analysis in frame analysis is often individual news stories that appeared in the selected newspaper during the selected study period (Linström & Marais, 2012).		
A: Quantitative part		
S/n	**Variable**	**Coding instructions**
1	News reporter's name:	(Write the name of the news reporter in full; where there are two or more, write all their names; where their names are hidden, write what the byline says, e.g., na mwandishi wetu (By our correspondent), na mwandishi maalumu (special correspondent), etc.
2	Newspaper	In what newspaper was the article published? 1 *Habari Leo* (H) 2. *Mwananchi* (M) 3. *Nipashe* (N)
3	Title of article (Text)	Write down the entire title of the article
4	Date (max. 6 digits)	Write the date when the article was published (Use six digits): YYMMDD (200924) for 24th September 2020
5	Identifying the main candidate	Who is the main candidate in this article? 1. Magufuli 2. Lissu 3. Membe 4. Mwinyi. 5 Seif 6. Samia 7. Salum 8. Others 9. No candidate 10. Lipumba
6	Characterization	1. Good and benevolent (i.e. based on their previous successes) 2. Controversial, i.e., based on their scandals, e.g. labelling the candidate 3. Nothing related to character 4. No candidate

7	*Appeal to faith, religion or God*	1. God, faith or religion is mentioned 2. Nothing related to religion 3. Presence of religious leaders
B: Qualitative part 1. Which words/phrases/visuals mark the religious rhetoric? 2. Who is the candidate being presented through a religious lens? 3. Is it for labelling them negatively or positively? 4. What topic does the religious appeal point to?		

Source: Researcher's Design (2024)

The sampling strategy combined census and purposive techniques. In the quantitative phase, the study employed a census approach, encompassing all front-page election news stories during the study period. From these news stories, the study purposively selected 19 based on thematic relevance for further qualitative analysis, with the sample size further guided by data saturation. Quantitative data were coded and analysed in the IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26, whereas qualitative content was subjected to thematic coding and quick-impression summaries during analysis. To ensure reliability and validity, inter-coder agreement trials achieved more than 85% consistency in line with recommended standards in media studies such as Tandoc et al. (2019). This triangulation facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how religious frames saturated news coverage of the 2020 Tanzanian election.

3. Results

The news analysis in *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi,* and *Nipashe* newspapers during Tanzania's 2020 general elections reveals that religious rhetoric played a central role in shaping electoral discourse. In all, the study covered 518 news stories across the three newspapers. *Habari Leo* published 165 news stories (31.8%), *Mwananchi* 149 (28.8%), and *Nipashe* 204 (39.4%), the highest. Overall, candidate coverage is unevenly distributed, with Magufuli (CCM) receiving 159 news stories (30.7%) and Lissu (CHADEMA) receiving 91 (17.6%). Candidates such as Hussein Mwinyi (CCM) and Maalim Seif Sharif Hamad (ACT-Wazalendo) from Zanzibar received relatively modest but notable coverage, with 30 (5.8%) and 26 (5.0%) mentions, respectively, while other candidates in the race received far less. Benard Membe (URT presidential candidate for ACT-Wazalendo) received 21 news stories (4.1%); Ibrahim Lipumba (URT presidential

candidate – CUF received only eight. The three newspapers consistently employed divine references, moral appeals and symbolic language to construct the image of President John Pombe Magufuli as a God-fearing, messianic leader, framed as such by clerics, politicians, newsrooms and himself.

Religious frames in the election news

For its first research objective, the study assessed the extent to which religious frames were used in election news coverage. From the analysed news stories, 122 (23.6%) contained religious appeals. *Habari Leo* featured 40 news stories (24.2%), *Mwananchi* 36 (24.2%), and *Nipashe* 46 (22.5%). The findings suggest that religion was not the dominant frame in election reporting, though it remained significant, as nearly one in four news stories linked politics to religious contexts. Table 2 exemplifies the religious rhetoric in the headlines of the three newspapers:

Table 2: Existence of divine legitimacy frame in the three newspapers' headlines

Newspaper	Headline
H200927	Wanaofanya siasa nyumba za ibada wakemewa (those politicking in houses of worship rebuked)
H201022	Viongozi wa dini kufunga na kuombea uchaguzi siku 3 (Religious leaders to fast and pray for the election for 3 days)
H201024	Viongozi wa dini wampongeza JPM kuondoa uchaguzi Jumapili (Religious leaders commend JPM for removing elections from Sunday)
H201025	Viongozi wa dini wakemea wenye nia ya kuleta vurugu (Religious leaders condemn those intending to cause chaos)
N200901	Askofu KKKT akemea matusi kwenye kampeni, aonya rushwa (KKKT bishop condemns insults during campaigns, warns against corruption)
N200902	Lissu atamba kuleta neema (Lissu boasts of bringing prosperity)
N200903	Lissu atangaza neema madini, kilimo (Lissu announces prosperity in minerals, agriculture)

N200923	Dk. Mwinyi aahidi neema kwa wajane (Dr. Mwinyi promises prosperity for widows)
M201010	JPM afichua siri Kitila, Askofu Gwajima (JPM reveals secrets about Kitila, Bishop Gwajima)

Source: Field Data (2024)

Key: H200927 means *Habari Leo*, year 2020, month of September, and the date of 27. Similarly, M201010 refers to *Mwananchi*, and N200923 to *Nipashe*.

Headlines from *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi,* and *Nipashe* reveal that political processes and actors were framed through the religious lens. *Habari Leo* prominently featured religious leaders and sacred spaces, through headlines such as 'Wanaofanya siasa nyumba za ibada wakemewa' (H200927) and 'Viongozi wa dini kufunga na kuombea uchaguzi siku 3' (H201022). This positioning of religion as a context of the election, provided a seemingly moral compass to legitimise the electoral process. The praise directed at President Magufuli for moving elections away from Sunday (H201024) illustrates alignment with religious norms and reinforcing his image as a leader respectful of divine order.

Mwananchi contextualised Magufuli's campaign with divine references, portraying him as God's chosen: 'Katika siku 30 zijazo za kampeni, Magufuli atajikita kueleza his vision (maono yake binafsi kwa nchi) kwani si dhambi kutekeleza zaidi ya yaliyoko kwenye ilani (In the next 30 days of the campaign, Magufuli will focus on explaining his personal vision for the country, as it is not a sin to accomplish more than what is outlined in the party manifesto)' (M200928). The word 'maono' is a church register commonly used, and 'dhambi' is a religious term. 'Maono' means 'visions (of the future)', and 'dhambi' is translated as 'sin'. Similarly, *Nipashe* employed divine rhetoric in candidate portrayals, with phrases like 'neema' (prosperity) repeatedly used to frame promises by Lissu (N200902, N200903) and Mwinyi (N200923); the word *neema* is a religious register connoting 'grace', implicitly suggesting that their leadership would bring spiritual and material blessings (prosperity).

Benard Camilius Membe (late) came openly to criticise clerics' open endorsements of candidates in an article '*Membe aachia wapiga kura waamue'* (Membe leaves it to the voters to decide):

> *Katika suala la kuepusha vurugu Membe amewataka viongozi wa dini ambao baadhi yao tayari wamejitokeza*

> *hadharani kuwaunga mkono baadhi ya wagombea, kuacha mara moja kufanya hivyo, ili kuepusha nchi kuingia katika mgogoro wa kidini jambo ambalo amesema ni la hatari endapo litatokea*. (N201020)

Translation:

> On the issue of preventing violence, Membe urged religious leaders, some of whom have already publicly endorsed certain candidates, to stop doing so immediately. He warned that such actions could plunge the country into a religious conflict, describing it as a dangerous situation if it occurred.

This statement is one of the few that openly criticised religious selective endorsements of political candidates. The text shows that religion in the election was not only being used symbolically in the media but was also becoming potentially divisive. Membe's warning suggests a real concern that public endorsements by religious leaders could shift elections from political competition to religious alignment.

Moreover, in *Nipashe*, religious figures, such as bishops (N200901), were invoked as moral authorities to condemn misconduct. In the *Mwananchi* newspaper, Gwajima was explicitly identified as a bishop who featured in political narratives as a contender (M201010). Kitila, who is a 'professor', was not named 'Prof Kitila' in the same headline where Gwajima's name was tagged 'Askofu Gwajima'. This framing practice indicates that religious discourse became a strategic narrative device, casting certain leaders and their actions as righteous and peaceful. This may indirectly implicated dissenting voice as less righteous and inciters of violence.

Differences in newspaper approaches were apparent. *Habari Leo*, on the one hand, emphasised religious leaders and sacred spaces, positioning Magufuli as divinely approved and amplifying faith-based endorsements. Similarly, *Mwananchi* adopted religious framing more subtly, quoting language with religious connotations, such as 'maono' (visions) and 'dhambi' (sin), blending spiritual discourse with campaign reporting. *Nipashe*, on the other hand, balanced religious framing by reporting Magufuli's faith-based rhetoric while including critical opposition voices, allowing some contestation of religious narratives. Across all three newspapers, religion emerges as a moderate strategic tool for constructing political authority, with divine legitimacy serving as a key mechanism for reinforcing the incumbent's image.

Types of religious framing in the election news

The second research objective was to determine the dominant types of religious framing in electoral news coverage. In this regard, the analysis determined three major patterns of religious framing: divine legitimacy framing, where candidates were implicitly or explicitly associated with God's will or divine approval; divine peace narrative, a peace-oriented religious framing, which linked religious values with national unity and stability; and moralised fear framing, where religion was invoked to warn against potential sources of division.

Divine legitimacy frame

The religious framing was expressed through a divine legitimacy frame. John Pombe Magufuli stood out as the most covered candidate, with the most religious references assigned to his name. The religious framing of Magufuli during the 2020 general elections by the newspapers *Habari Leo*, *Mwananchi*, and *Nipashe* played a pivotal role in constructing his image as a God-fearing leader. In *Habari Leo*, 20 (12.1%) of 165 news stories were of this kind; *Mwananchi* had 5 (3.4%) of 149; and *Nipashe* had 21 (10.2%) of 204. These news stories unequivocally cast Magufuli in religious terms, emphasising faith and God.

The three newspapers frequently blended political discourse with religious rhetoric, aligning Magufuli with a divine purpose and portraying his leadership as a product of faith and destiny rather than policy decisions. This framing strengthened his public image as it resonated deeply with Tanzania's predominantly religious population, where both Christianity and Islam play significant cultural and political roles.

Looking into the news reports, there is a commonality in the use of phrases with divine references contextualising Magufuli as God's chosen:

> *Alisema wakati dunia nzima watu hawaendi kazini, hawaendi shambani madukani, sokoni, kampuni na maofisi yamefungwa na watu wakifunika mdomo kwa sababu ya corona, Tanzania kwa uwezo wa Mungu ilijipanga vyema na kuingia yenyewe Uchumi wa kati* (H200929)
>
> Translation:
>
> He said that while the whole world was at a standstill, with people not going to work, farms, shops, markets, or companies, with offices closed and people covering their mouths due to

> the coronavirus, Tanzania, by God's grace, stood firm and achieved middle-income status.

The candidate openly mentioned 'kwa uwezo wa Mungu' (by God's grace). The context indicates that he led Tanzanians in prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic, and not only were their prayers answered, but prosperity also ensued.

> *Katika siku 30 zijazo za kampeni, Magufuli atajikita kueleza his vision (maono yake binafsi kwa nchi) kwani si dhambi kutekeleza zaidi ya yaliyoko kwenye ilani…'* (M200928)

Translation:

> Over the next 30 days of the campaign, Magufuli will focus on explaining his personal vision for the country, as it is not a sin to do more than what is outlined in the party manifesto.

The word 'maono' is often a church-registering and 'dhambi' is a religious term. The word maono means 'visions (of the future)' and dhambi is translated as 'sin'. In another news story:

> *Tumepata mafanikio makubwa, leo maji yanatoka huko yalikowekwa na Mungu, kilomita mia, yanakuja hapa, si kitu kidogo, alisema Magufuli na kuwaomba kura wakazi wa mji huo*. (M200903)

Translation:

> We have achieved great success. Today, water flows from where God placed it, travelling hundreds of kilometres to reach here. This is no small feat,' said Magufuli, as he asked the residents of the town for their votes.

Often, when he took to the podium, Magufuli said that God came before everything else, and in the text quoted above, he points out that God placed water there for him to bring it to the people. In another news article, the candidate said:

> *Kati ya kipindi kigumu nilichopata ni kile. Nikaanza kumuomba Mungu, tukaanza uchunguzi wa kuyapima mapapai na tukayakuta na corona. Nikasema huu ni mchezo mchafu, walitaka kutuletea chanjo, kutuuzia dawa ili wapate pesa. Niliwakwamisha. Nikasema*

> *tutamwomba Mungu corona itaondoka, leo haipo*. (N201013)

Translation:

> One of the toughest times I experienced was then. I began to pray to God, and we started investigating by testing papayas, and they tested positive for coronavirus. I said, 'This is a dirty game.' They wanted to bring us vaccines and sell us medicine to make money. I blocked their plans. I said we would pray to God, and the coronavirus would disappear. Today, it is no longer here.

The candidate clearly pointed out, 'I started praying to God.' *Nipashe* newspaper highlighted Magufuli's faith-driven interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic, portraying him as a leader whose governance was blessed and sanctioned by God. The candidate points:

> *Tanzania tuna uhuru, makanisa ruksa, misikiti ruksa, nchi zingine hata uhuru wa kuabudu haupo…Baada ya maombi ugonjwa wa korona ukaenda kwa wengine huko, tumshangilie Mungu kwa kupiga miluzi. Mungu hoyee, hayo ndiyo maajabu ya Mungu katika nchi yetu. Ndiyo faida ya kumtanguliza Mungu* (N200910)

Translation:

> In Tanzania, we have freedom: churches and mosques are open, while in some countries, even the freedom to worship does not exist. After our prayers, the coronavirus went elsewhere. Let us cheer for God with whistles! Praise God! These are God's miracles in our country. This is the benefit of putting God first.

This statement portrays Tanzania's handling of COVID-19 pandemic as a direct result of divine intervention. The three newspapers' framing practices attribute national success to God's favour rather than to public health strategy. According to the story, leadership that prioritises faith, putting God first brings protection, freedom and national prosperity. The religious framing constructed Magufuli not merely as a political leader but also as a divinely sanctioned figure. Magufuli's authority and achievements are presented as manifestations of God's will.

By consistently blending religious language with political accomplishments, the three newspapers elevated Magufuli's leadership beyond policy performance to a sacred moral plane. Overall, this framing blurred the boundary between faith and politics. It positioned electoral support for Magufuli as aligned with religious belief and divine purpose rather than a civic choice.

Divine Peace Narrative

The three newspapers also exhibited a narrative that contextualised peace through religious appeals. This is the second dominant religious framing that this study establishes. In this frame, electoral processes were linked to national unity and stability. The frame pointed to avoidance of chaos through making references to prayer and fasting. The three newspapers framed peace not only as a political necessity but also as a spiritual obligation for citizens.

Peace was not a peripheral topic in the three newspapers during the 2020 general elections. The theme appears in 57 (11%) of 518 news stories analysed. *Habari Leo* had 31 (18.8%) such news stories, *Mwananchi* 08 (5.4%), and *Nipashe* 18 (8.8%). In addition, in many more news stories, i.e. 114 (22%), peace was used as the context for presenting the 2020 general elections news; in Habari Leo newspaper, there were 53 (32.1%) of its total news stories, *Mwananchi* 26 (17.4%) and *Nipashe* 35 (17.1%).

Implicitly, although peace was directly addressed in 11% of the news stories analysed, it functioned even more prominently as a contextual frame in 22%. This suggests that newspapers embedded peace narratives strategically within broader election coverage. However, a closer look at the news stories evidences religious peace framing. For instance, 'JPM: Tusichezee amani… viongozi wa dini wamuunga mkono' (Let us not play with peace; religious leaders support him-H200921). This headline indicates that clerics supported Magufuli in his call for peaceful elections. In another text, the newspaper amplified this narrative of connecting peace, religion and politics:

> *Lazima tupate kiongozi mwenye hofu ya mwenyezi Mungu, suala la kuimarisha amani na utulivu ni muhimu sana kwetu, tukipata kiongozi mwenye kuanzisha mtafaruku, kwa kauli zake, lugha zake na matendo yake wanaoumia ni akina mama na Watoto. Tuchague chama chenye uwezo na mwelekeo wa kumarisha amani* (H201007):

Translated as:

> We must have a leader who fears Almighty God. Strengthening peace and stability is very important to

> us. If we elect a leader who incites conflict through their words, language and actions, it is women and children who will suffer the most. Let us choose a party with the capability and vision to strengthen peace.

This text links the fear of God in a leader to the protection of women and children and provides a context in which peace is seen as a byproduct of divine intervention. The text singles out Magufuli as a candidate who qualifies in the fear of the Lord, a peace custodian and someone who can protect the vulnerable, women and children. The electoral choice is cast in the frame of peace provided by a moral decision of a divinely sanctioned Magufuli. The framing practices risk undermining political competition**,** discouraging leaders perceived as confrontational, such as Tundu Lissu: *Nipashe* amplified:

> *Tunamwomba Mungu akulinde kwa kipindi chote utakachokuwa Moshi, na safari yako utakapokuwa popote. Sisi wanakilimanjaro na kwa niaba ya dini zote, tunapenda kufanya maombi kwa nchi yetu, kwako na watu wote. Mungu tuepushe na vurugu za aina zote, tukailinde amani, tuepushe na kutoelewana, majivuno, kiburi na maneno yanayochochea amani' (N201022)*

Translation:

> We pray to God to protect you throughout your time in Moshi and wherever your journey takes you. As the people of Kilimanjaro, and on behalf of all religions, we wish to offer prayers for our country, for you, and for all people. May God shield us from all forms of violence, help us safeguard peace, and keep us away from misunderstandings, arrogance, pride and words that incite conflict.

This excerpt frames peace as a collective spiritual responsibility, invoking religious unity and divine protection to legitimise social harmony during the electoral period. By emphasising the avoidance of arrogance, conflict and inflammatory speech, the newspaper reinforces a moralised discourse of stability that prioritises national cohesion over political confrontation. This peace frame was commonplace in the three newspapers' religious framing. The framing emphasised national unity and stability and the avoidance of chaos.

The practice linked these outcomes to religious rituals such as fasting and prayer. While the news stories suggested that Magufuli's leadership ensured peace, they implicitly framed the opposition as potentially disruptive.

Moralised fear framing

The data in this study show that the incumbent, on the one hand, stood out as a moral compass, with 144 (90.6%) of his 159 news stories portraying him as a leader of good character. Lissu's score was almost evenly split, with his 42 news stories (Habari Leo 5; Mwananchi 17; and Nipashe 20) portraying him in a positive light, and 32 (Habari Leo 9; Mwananchi 10; and *Nipashe* 13) focusing on controversies. The controversies portrayed Lissu as being a candidate likely to incite violence or being in a standoff with authorities such as the National Electoral Commission (NEC), now the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the registrar of political parties in Tanzania, and the police. In one article, Lissu pointed out: 'tusipokuwa na mawakala msajili hakitaeleweka nchi hii na atakayevunja amani sio sisi, ni wale wanaokula njama za kutoapisha mawakala wetu (If we do not have agents, the registrar should know that things will get ugly in this country, and those who will disrupt peace are not us, but those conspiring to prevent our agents from being sworn in M200928).' This text, carried in the *Mwananchi* newspaper, alarms readers and fuels fear of the opposition, especially the main opposition's initiatives to protest injustice.

Newspapers' coverage overwhelmingly framed Magufuli as a morally upright and benevolent leader, depicting him as a stabilising and trustworthy figure. At the same time, Tundu Lissu's portrayal was more ambivalent, torn between moral authority and controversies. News texts are subtly presented:

> We pray to God to protect you throughout your time in Moshi and wherever your journey takes you. As the people of Kilimanjaro, and on behalf of all religions, we wish to offer prayers for our country, for you, and for all people. May God shield us from all forms of violence, help us safeguard peace, and keep us away from misunderstandings, arrogance, pride and words that incite conflict *(N201022).*

This excerpt conveys words from KKKT (Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania/The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania) archbishop Fredrick Shoo, presumably to invoke fear of violence, with Magufuli presented as the moral authority, divinely sanctioned to safeguard the country, as he is endorsed

by all religions (as the cleric claimed). 'God shield us from all forms of violence… and keep us away from all misunderstandings, arrogance, pride and words that incite conflict. ' Collectively, this statement frames opposition to Magufuli as embodying these negative attributes. Kassim Majaliwa, the then prime minister, retorted in one of his speeches:

> We must have a leader who fears Almighty God. Strengthening peace and stability is very important to us. If we elect a leader who incites conflict through their words, language and actions, it is women and children who will suffer the most. Let us choose a party with the capability and vision to strengthen peace. (H201007)

Habari Leo newspaper amplified moralised fear framing by linking the suffering of women and children, resulting from reckless political decisions, to selected leaders branded as inciting violence, leaving Magufuli as the only choice for voters, as the leader who fears God. Magufuli's words were also amplified, as follows*:*

> *Hili gonjwa corona ni la ajabu sana sisi hapa tumepambana na cha ajabu tumebanana tu, ila niwashukuru watanzania kwa kuungana nami kuomba kwa Mungu, maana mlinisikia tukaomba Mungu akasikia akatuponya, maana kama tungefunga nchi na watu hali ingekuwa mbaya… alisema ndio maana narudisha shukrani kwa Mungu na kusema wengine hawaamini hilo, na kwamba iwapo wananchi katika uchaguzi huu watawachagua upinzani, kuna hatari ya kufungiwa ndani kwenye janga hili la corona na kusema hata yeye atajuta na kuwaomba wananchi kutofanya makosa*. (H200922)

Translation:

> This COVID-19 pandemic is very strange. We have fought against it, yet we are now standing in close contact (no social distancing). I want to thank Tanzanians for joining me in prayer. When you heard me, we prayed to God, and He listened and healed us. If we had locked down the country, people would have suffered greatly. He said that is why he gives thanks to God and acknowledges that some people do not believe in this. He further warned that if citizens vote for

> the opposition in this election, they risk being placed under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He added that even he would regret such an outcome and urged citizens not to make such a mistake.

In this news story, divine intervention is portrayed as the reason for Tanzania's purported victory over COVID-19. While it may seem innocent, the text frames opposition as a threat to national well-being, suggesting that an alternative leadership to Magufuli would unnecessarily impose lockdowns and thus cause suffering. These fear-based framing practices strengthened Magufuli's image as a protector of freedom:

> He said that while the whole world was at a standstill, people not going to work, not going to farms, shops, markets, companies and offices closed, with people covering their mouths due to the coronavirus, Tanzania, by God's grace, stood firmly and achieved middle-income status (H200929)

The religious rhetoric in this text provides an interpretive context that positions Magufuli as allied with divine will and indirectly points the opposition image towards a context where they may be perceived as a challenge to both national stability and divine will. *Mwananchi* accommodated the rhetoric:

> *Magufuli aliwashukuru viongozi wa dini kwa kuongoza maombi ya kitaifa ili kuondokana na janga la corona ambalo linaukabili ulimwengu kwa sasa. Alisema ugonjwa huo haupo hapa nchini kutokana na nguvu ya maombi…. Aliwataka viongozi hao kuwaeleza mataifa kwamba hakuna linaloshindikana mbele ya Mungu na kupitia yeye Tanzania haina tena ugonjwa huo ambao unaripotiwa kuua maelfu ya watu ulimwenguni kote*. (M200901)

Translation:

> Magufuli thanked religious leaders for leading national prayers to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, which is currently affecting the world. He stated that the disease no longer exists in the country, thanks to the power of prayer. He urged the leaders to tell the world that nothing is impossible before God and that, through his power, Tanzania is now free from the disease, which is reported to be claiming thousands of lives globally.

In this text, a faith-based narrative connects public health to divine intervention. The three newspapers' framing practices generally amplified prayer and moral adherence while downplaying policy measures. Challenges to Magufuli's moral compass risk dragging Tanzania into trouble as the candidate claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic claimed thousands of lives all over the world, and that is something to fear.

Generally, the framing practices in the three newspapers illustrate a religious lens, intertwining morality, faith, and political loyalty. In such an environment, politics is linked to religious authority, sidelining pluralistic and issue-based democratic debates.

4. Discussion

This study has highlighted a significant discursive mechanism of religious framing practices in *Habari Leo, Mwananchi*, and *Nipashe* newspapers during Tanzania's 2020 general elections. The analysis indicates that religion was indeed a structured interpretive lens through which election news stories were presented. Of the 518 news stories, religion appears in 122 (23.6%), a proportion that, though not dominant, indicates that for every four news articles, one contains religious appeals. Indeed, these findings suggest that religious framing is not a peripheral rhetorical device in Tanzania. Framing theory illuminates the tendency of frames to emphasise some perceived realities over others (Entman, 1993). This study establishes that the 2020 general elections were constructed as moral and spiritual events rather than merely political contests. John Magufuli, in particular, emerges as the most favourably covered candidate, with a significant portion of his coverage appealing to religious rituals such as prayers and fasting.

News framing emerges through interaction between the media and external actors (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2010). The three newspapers selected and emphasised political reality aspects that linked leadership with religious and moral uprightness. Whether this was done on purpose or not, the three newspapers played a frame-setting role in reinforcing religious narratives that resonate deeply with Tanzanian society. Makulilo and Henry (2023) note that Tanzania is known as a highly religious society. The findings indicate strategic placement of religious rhetoric in the three newspapers' presentation of election news, with *Habari Leo* (24.2%), *Mwananchi* (24.2%), and *Nipashe* (22.5%) suggesting that religious framing was not confined to a single

newsroom or editorial but rather reflected a broader media practice of amplifying politicians' news strategies. This can be understood in the context of a restrictive media environment during the 2020 election period (Chikohomero & Mjenga, 2020). The three newspapers' navigation of those structural constraints led them to parrot candidates' statements verbatim rather than initiate their own strategic framing, thereby providing significant political legitimation for John Magufuli and delegitimating Tundu Lissu and other opposition candidates (such as Membe).

Magufuli was elevated as a God-fearing figure, a man of prayer and supported by a pool of clerics, as exemplified by KKKT archbishop Fredrick Shoo's (N201022) declaration that all religions support Magufuli. Crockford (2023), in the US context, points out that both opponents and supporters of Donald Trump see him in a religious frame, either as a dangerous authoritarian leader or a messianic saviour. There was hardly any criticism against Magufuli's religious endorsements except for the few, like Membe's warning (N201020). According to Mrutu (2023). The Lutheran Church plays a pivotal role in peacebuilding, covering mediation, conflict resolution, and advocacy for peace. Indeed, the KKKT church collaborates with the government to facilitate community dialogue, provide social services, support education, and contribute to economic development, thereby fostering community well-being (Mrutu, 2023). While this is also true of other churches and is generally desirable, religious endorsement indicates the churches' alignment with the incumbent and distancing from the opposition. According to Framing Theory, as Entman (1993) put it, this salience of religion frames in the three newspapers demonstrates how it was strategically placed to define problems, diagnose causes, make judgements and finally suggest possible remedies. Magufuli was portrayed as divinely sanctioned while the opposition was diagnosed and implicated as inciters of violence in the cleric's words praying 'keep us away from misunderstandings, arrogance, pride and words that incite conflict *(N201022)'.*

The three newspapers uncritically amplified the religious rhetoric surrounding Magufuli's campaign. Studies indicate that media actively intervene in political communication processes (Esser, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008). In Tanzania, this happened when the three newspapers selected culturally resonant religious symbols. As pointed out, Tanzania is known as a very religious society (Makulilo & Henry, 2023). The three newspapers framed the electoral contest from a religious perspective, likely serving as conduits for political campaign news

strategies, especially those of John Magufuli. Religion served as a discursive resource, elevating the events of the 2020 general election into moral and spiritual contests. The invocation of religious rituals, such as prayers and declarations of fasting, by clerics indicates active participation by religious institutions in politics in Tanzania. Gahnström (2012) pointed out that references to Tanzania's national unity are frequent among Tanzanians, but considerable resentment exists among many against the use of religious politics. Setiawan et al. (2025) argue that religion plays a complex role in the legitimacy of political power in different cultures; from the use of religion as a tool of legitimacy by political leaders to its role in shaping national identity and driving social change, religion has had a significant impact on social and political structures. Magufuli's legitimacy during the 2020 general elections was mediated, in part, through spiritual symbolism, intertwining faith and democratic practice in the media discourse. These religious beliefs remain socially central in Tanzania and provide a culturally intelligible vocabulary for evaluating leadership.

In determining the types of religious framing that were dominant during the 2020 general elections, this study identifies three dominant religious frames. These are divine legitimacy, divine peace narrative, and moralised fear framing:

Firstly, the divine legitimacy frame was particularly salient in news stories about John Magufuli. News stories consistently associated his persona and leadership with God and religious rituals, and he is mentioned in church registers such as 'neema', 'kufufua', 'kuomba', 'maono', and '*si dhambi'.* As Setiawan et al. (2025) argue, religion plays a complex role in the legitimacy of political power in different cultures. In Tanzania, a very religious society (Makulilo & Henry, 2023), development successes and the handling of COVID-19 were linked to prayer and divine intervention, narratives that reinforced Magufuli's divine legitimacy. Such framing also reflects Msagalla's (2024) findings regarding the strategic deployment of religious metaphors in Tanzanian political discourse in the parliament.

In Magufuli coverage, there was frequent invocation of religious practices such as prayers and fasting, presented in the context of handling COVID-19 during his first term. This type of framing legitimised him while subtly suggesting that any alternative leadership would result in suffering and loss. Magufuli's leadership was framed in the newspapers as an outcome of divine favour rather than just policy performance, with clerics and Magufuli himself often calling for prayers. Gruenbaum (2020) argues that Tanzania's president, John Magufuli, during

COVID-19, looked to prayer and snake oil to fight the pandemic; he claimed Christian rituals killed the coronavirus, then sent a plane to collect an herbal potion touted by the then Madagascan president (Lusekelo, 2021).

Secondly, the divine peace narrative constitutes another religious frame type. While peace appears as a topic in 11% of the 518 analysed news stories, as a frame it appears in 122 (23.6%), indicating peace's position as an embedded narrative in electoral coverage in Tanzania. Peace was linked to religious practices such as prayer and fasting, with actors, especially clerics, emphasising that fasting was necessary for the nation's peace. Meanwhile, Magufuli insisted on prayers, revealing that *Ndiyo faida ya kumtanguliza Mungu* (the benefit of putting God first) (N200910). This framing practice shows a direction which points that peace is contingent upon electing Magufuli, a God-fearing leader. Gahnstroem (2012) established that, although religion during the one-party era was not a significant political resource, the study accurately predicted that religion's role in Tanzanian politics might increase following the reintroduction of multiparty politics. It has, and this is the main argument of the current study. In this study, newspaper narratives on the campaign fostered civic exclusion by emphasising the discourse of unity, thereby simultaneously implying that alternative leadership could disrupt national peace. This is to say that framing practices in religious rhetoric functioned as an exclusionary device for the sake of peace.

Then, this study has also highlighted moralised fear framing practices. While Magufuli was overwhelmingly framed as morally right, his main rival had an almost even split between news stories portraying him as a benevolent leader and those casting him in a controversial light. Benevolence entails goodwill or kindness towards others (Neumann *et al*., 2025). Lissu's portrayal was more ambivalent and frequently linked to controversy. It may be argued that by associating stability and divine favour with incumbency, opposition voices were implicitly cast as risks. The electoral choice was thus framed as a moral safeguard against instability. The reason for the violent conflicts during elections in Nigeria is because of the zeal of political actors to exploit ethno-religious conflicts for political advantage (Jinmi-Ahisu & Osah, 2021).

The three newspapers amplified the call for prayer and fasting as a means of ensuring national harmony. Any voice, especially those dissenting ones, was judged as ungodly and implicated with risks of inciting violence and conflicts (this should be taken with reservation, not to mean that we suggest that Tanzania experiences conflicts. In Tanzania, there is apparently no evidence of conflicts despite scattered incidents of violence. Makulilo and Henry (2023)

argue that Tanzania's peace mechanisms are primarily based on a conflict prevention approach, which traces its origin to the nation-building (project) undertaken in the infancy stage of the nation. No wonder incidents occurred in which police and other state institutions confronted opposition candidates, especially Tundu Lissu. The newspapers used religious language as a taken-for-granted vocabulary for articulating political activities, but the practice legitimised incumbency while delegitimising the opposition.

The predominance of positive religious framing of the incumbent marks a departure from earlier elections in Tanzania, in which religious labelling targeted opposition actors (Babeiya, 2012; Makulilo, 2012) where Civic United Front (CUF) was labelled as a Muslim party and Chama Cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA) was associated with Catholicism, and its presidential candidate, Wilbrod Slaa, was labelled 'the priest'. In the 2020 general elections, the three newspapers did not cover opposition parties while referencing religious rhetoric.

A worry may be that the findings that overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic is tied to a religious narrative exclude rational explanations, such as scientific and/or institutional considerations. Should Tanzania and/or the world be in another danger in the future, it is not hard to predict that the media in Tanzania, with this alignment to the government of the day, will not be in a good position to passionately interrogate and suggest scientifically supported solutions**.** With a deeply religious society in Tanzania, the media may succumb to reproducing religiously infused narratives, in line with the political authority that aligns with them, instead of providing robust solutions, especially from expert sources. Such media alignments may be signalling loss of a watchdog role, as may be exemplified in Evans & Kaynak (2015), that in the Turkish context, the media come to function as the vanguard of the opposing sides (alignments based on religion), the impact is twofold: loss of an important public watchdog and a deepening of societal rifts.

The noted slight variations among the newspapers in religious framing practices of elections suggest a media culture in which religion is a socially resonant and politically strategic resource. However, in the three newspapers, religion is embedded in routine news practices rather than deployed as an exceptional rhetorical device. This normalisation of divine references and faith-based moral appeals indicates that journalists and political actors shared a common symbolic catalogue. While this renders religion an effective and culturally

intelligible framing tool in Tanzania, the media's independent check on power is threatened as they begin to act as political conduits.

Nonetheless, the Tanzanian context and the three newspapers' performance do not indicate sectarian alignments; they were simply a campaign news strategy by actors to attract attention from the deeply religious society. Tanzania exhibits tremendous confidence and respect for religious institutions and leaders (Makulilo & Henry, 2023). Indeed, Tanzanians, like other Africans, tend to identify more with religion than with any other identity (Mkandala et al., 2006; Makulilo & Henry, 2023). The concerns expressed by Gahnstroem (2012) regarding the future of religious relations in the country from the increasingly inflammatory rhetoric among religious leaders and politicians, arguing that these issues should be addressed politically, are important to stress in light of the demonstrated intricate interplay among media, religion and political authority in the current study. Religious framing served not only as a descriptive rhetoric but also as a mechanism for constructing legitimacy, with the incumbent enjoying full media support for religious discourse, while the newspapers subtly positioned opposition to Magufuli as a risk to national peace and stability.

5. Conclusion

The presence of a notable religious framing across the three newspapers and the intertwining of divine legitimacy, peace narratives, and moralised fear appeals imply that, in Tanzania, elections are conceived, in part, as matters beyond policy considerations. The three newspapers cast Magufuli in religious terms, using symbols, rituals, and endorsements, while covering opposition rallies in a secular tone, focusing on economic and governance issues rather than faith-based appeals. Embedded within culturally resonant belief systems, the newspapers' selection of a religious frame excluded opposition candidates from this lane, while effectively casting Magufuli's choice as not only a civic act but also a moral and spiritual decision. The study findings reinforce theoretical arguments that media framing not only reflects political reality but also actively constructs interpretive frameworks for understanding candidates and issues. The three newspapers' selective deployment in favour of incumbency narrowed deliberative space, marginalising alternative political voices. By situating these findings within existing scholarship on media, religion and political communication, the study contributes to broader debates about the role of culturally embedded narratives in election campaigns. Also, this study opens important avenues for future research. The developments surrounding the

2025 general elections, in which religious leaders have reportedly taken more overtly critical positions toward the incumbent, suggest a shift in the relationship between religion and political authority. A comparative analysis between 2020 and 2025 would provide valuable insight into whether religious framing continues to consolidate power or increasingly functions as a site of contestation.

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