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POPULISM IN AFRICA

Personalistic leaders and the illusion of representation

Bruce Mutsvairo and Susana Salgado

Introduction

From anti-colonial figureheads like the late Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to the emerging crop of politicians such as South Africa’s Economic Freedom Fighters party’s firebrand leader Julius Malema, known for his radically left-leaning yet unequivocal stance on black consciousness, Africa has had its share of populist politicians, and several of the features of what is considered populism in European and American countries have also been present in African politics over the last decades. In addition to strong personalistic leaders (Resnick 2017), there have also been political strategies aimed at strengthening a direct connection between the political leader and citizens, nationalism and nativism, as well as anti-immigration positions (e.g. Angola), or the ‘us and them’ divide of society (e.g. against ethnic and sexual minorities in Uganda). Such populist rhetoric is often mixed with illiberal and sometimes even despotic approaches to political power. The rise of populism in Africa, both historically and contemporarily, has been significantly aided by the presence of media outlets that take an uncompromising stance, especially when it comes to supporting their leader. In Southern Africa, the majority of political establishments that brought independence have lingered in power and are known for their uncompromising anti-colonialism stance. Their position is frequently supported by state media outlets that consider opposition parties as an extension of neo-colonialism or as the enemy of the people: for example, newspapers such as the state-owned Herald in Zimbabwe that steadfastly support the ruling ZANU PF party using both propaganda and innuendos to convince supporters and discredit foes.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of populism in Africa analysing extant literature and looking at four specific cases (Amin in Uganda, Machel in Mozambique, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and Malema in South Africa), who were selected considering their varying features of populism and distinct generational differences. Our overall goal is to critically analyse and contribute to the understanding of the political and media populism that have persisted on the continent since the days of colonialism.

Some singularities of populism in Africa

They come in different shapes and sizes, but what binds them together seems to be their desire to represent the ‘will of the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 90). Indeed, populism
involves putting the ‘people’ (e.g. the common citizen, the worker, the poor) at the centre of
speeches and decisions. Basically, it holds that state institutions should be first and foremost
responsive to the needs and concerns of the people. The ideal of morality is often central in
populist claims. In the form of liberation movements’ leaders, and over time, several African
political leaders have become known for their populist charisma or for having resorted to popu-
list ideas and strategies to mobilise supporters. As Resnick (2017) posits, ‘Africa represents an
especially challenging case for delineating populism due to the predominance of personalistic
leaders and the lack of policy ideology underlying many political parties’. In defining populism
within a South African context, Vincent (2011) posits,

what makes a politics ‘populist’ is not a particular, definable set of values or a par-
ticular social, political or economic programme but rather an antagonism to existing
orthodoxies, to elite values and to the existing hierarchies governing the way in which
power is organised and distributed.

(2011, 4)

An African populist has to appeal ‘directly to the masses for legitimacy’ (Carbone 2005, 1),
present an image of ‘one of the people’ ready to use their common sense and lived experience
to defend the ‘common man’ against manipulative elites (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015, 5), or
make an attempt to ‘remake a connection between parties and voters whose livelihoods and
communities are precarious’ (Fraser 2017, 461). According to Vincent, the central theme that
connects African populists with each other is ‘the appeal to “the people” as the legitimizing
authority for a particular set of ideas’ (2011, 3).

While in many parts of the world, radical politicians lead from the front against established
political elites, in Africa, history has been at the centre of emerging and evolving populist
discourses. Across the continent, populists are often united by their unwavering anti-colonial
rhetoric. Theirs is a message of hope, and they take no shame in delivering such a message,
even if it catches them in blunt contradictions, including instances in which they would have
privately benefited from the same system they staunchly oppose publicly. They delegitimise all
opposition: basically any political leader other than themselves.

Yet populist political leaders in Africa are not usually short of admirers. They could be
bound by their ‘shared experience of violent struggle’ (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3), or they
could simply enjoy riding on their charm, dominance, and charisma (Tormey 2018). Populism
in Africa, needless to say, ‘legitimizes’ former freedom fighters’ quest to offer a message of hope
in the light of perceived Western domination (Melber 2018, 679). Such a message instantly
appeals to the multitudes, most of whom have come across some similar versions of colonial
history at primary or secondary school. Facts are framed to fit a particular narrative, one in
which the ‘subaltern’ is often portrayed as a victim of long-lasting colonial servitude (Spivak
1988, 271).

Extant research has conceptualised populism differently: it can be ideological, stressing the
direct connection with the will of the people; a communication frame which purports to speak
in the name of the people; a discursive or performative style, in which a populist adopts of
political style that appeals to the people; or a form of political mobilisation (e.g. Gidron and
Bonikowski 2013; Nai and Comma 2019). Equally, African populists adopt various tactics,
including the use of simplified rhetoric, to present themselves as genuine representatives of the
people and to establish a direct connection between them and the people. Key to their success
is their claim to give voice (and thus power) to the people (Adeakin and Zirker 2017). But, as
in other contexts, the word ‘people’ itself is problematic. It is difficult to tell how they measure
which people whose interests they purport to represent. For example, it is not credible that the entire population of Uganda summarily supported Amin’s decision to expel Asians from the East African country, yet he nevertheless claimed his decision was being made in the interest of his ‘country folk’. Even when populist leaders claim to speak on behalf of the majority, it is unclear which yardstick is used to determine their claim of democratic superiority.

Although populism has often been associated with the erosion of freedom of expression and press freedom in other parts of the world, the media environment in African countries makes it difficult to evaluate the actual impact of populism on media freedom. The political instrumentalisation of mainstream media by ruling elites is a common characteristic of several governments in Africa, even in countries where democratic consolidation has found little obstacles to flourishing, such as Cape Verde (e.g. Salgado 2014). Most media outlets, particularly state-controlled news media with nationwide dissemination, are frequently used as tools to support the governments’ decisions and influence the citizens’ views. In the 1990s, changes in national laws allowed for the proliferation of privately owned media in many countries, but with few exceptions, these did not become fully independent from political and economic powers and often struggled to survive. More recently, the internet and social media have strengthened the forms of populism more dependent on the unmediated links between the political leader and the people.

Research focused on other parts of the world has already provided evidence of the key role that the media plays in supporting and mobilising for populist causes (e.g. Mazzoleni 2014; Mudde 2004). Even when media outlets do not openly support populist politicians, when politics is covered through oversimplified, negative, and sensationalist news reports, it tends to favour populist politicians by shaping favourable climates of opinion for populist leaders, thus improving their chances of getting elected. Media players can also help populist political leaders by generating user-friendly political news (Manucci 2017) or giving them the platform to prove their media savviness (Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018), which is a key factor in maintaining their popularity.

For many populist leaders, some of whom could have their integrity questioned by the neoliberal private media (e.g. Malema in South Africa), the advent of social media has facilitated direct access to the people without journalistic interference. This type of media offers an opportunity not only to frame issues, but also to set a narrative that influences the agenda and consequently gain a favourable public opinion (e.g. Gainous and Wagner 2014; Blumler and Gurevitch 2001).

Some African cases of populism

Next, we look closely at four cases that represent different manifestations of populist politics and leadership in Africa. We analyse these four political leaders’ rhetoric, tactics, strategies, and policies with the overall aim of contributing to the understanding of the origins and impact of populism in contemporary African societies.

Idi Amin in Uganda

Described by Hoberman (2017) as a ‘populist demagogue’, Amin came to power through a military coup and ruled Uganda with an iron fist for nearly a decade between 1971 and 1979. Keatley (2003) argues that the self-proclaimed Conqueror of the British Empire responded to all forms of dissent from both loyalists and political enemies with heavy-handed systematic brutality and repression. Even though he associated himself with local benevolence, he nevertheless
unleashed an ethnically charged wave of repression against the same people he claimed to be representing (Munnion 1972; Tall 1982; Kyemba 1977).

In defining populism, Kyle and Gultchin (2018) propound that ‘rather than seeing politics as a battleground between different policy positions, populists attribute a singular common good to the people: a policy goal that cannot be debated based on evidence but that derives from the common sense of the people’. By targeting the Asian community, consequently deporting them by the thousands, Amin saw no irony in claiming that dispatching Asians from Uganda was being done to protect the interests of ethnic Ugandans, who he had targeted (Jørgensen 1981). Chasing Asians away on a radical nationalist, nativist, and thus exclusionary populist platform was therefore justified by what he considered to be a pro-people agenda that was meant to benefit black Ugandans. Amin, who claimed ‘God told him to order the expulsion’ (Bhushan 2020), accused the Asians of ‘milking Uganda’s money’ or ‘sabotaging Uganda’s economy’ (Dawood 2016). In insisting that he was protecting the interests of locals by chasing out Asians, Amin turned to the “us versus them” rhetoric which is often used by populists to win the support of the native people (e.g. Henning 2018; Rice-Oxley and Kalia 2018).

The argument by Barber (2019) that ‘populists are not tyrants or dictators’ because they ‘rely on the support of the people for their power’ (2019, 129) appears to be not in tandem with African politics, in which, in the case of Amin and others, dictatorial tendencies are apparent, whereas appealing to the people seems to be equally significant. While protecting the interest of ‘ethnic Ugandans’ appealed to locals, many did not realise Amin only did this whenever it was handier for him to do so. Patel (1972) argues that African leaders, apart from Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda and Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, responded to Amin’s persecution of Asians by adopting a non-interference policy, an approach that would prove to be instrumental in the successful implementation of populist agendas by the next generation of anti-colonial leaders, such as Zimbabwe’s Mugabe. Religion was one of the reasons evoked by Amin to justify the expulsion of Asians from his country. This justification would also receive a tacit endorsement from future populist leaders (e.g. Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, and Jacob Zuma in South Africa) as they also turned to religion to rationalise their actions.

Samora Machel in Mozambique

Samora Machel, a guerrilla leader, became Mozambique’s first president after independence from Portugal in June 1975 and until 1986, when he died in a plane crash. For several years, Machel held ‘the country together largely by force of his own personality, traveling extensively, condemning corruption and inefficiency’ (Krebs 1986). Even though the use of (populist) ideas and words always needs to be placed into the proper context, there are several elements that substantiate Machel’s populist approach to politics and thus support the label of populist leader in his case: the use that he made of his own charisma and the way in which he framed his proposals are just a couple of examples. Machel’s approach to politics was completely people centred; there are several references to the ‘people’s power’ and to the priority that should always be given to the people: for example, in a speech he gave in Maputo on 7 February 1980, Machel’s own words were, ‘The State must be the first to be organized and totally committed to serving the interests of the people’ (Machel 1987).

The anti-system narrative was also recurrent in his rhetoric (e.g. ‘profound change of the country’s society and politics’), even after Samora Machel formed his government and became part of the ‘system’. The anti-system position was rooted in a dramatic change from the colonial system of politics and society, but it also pushed forward a socialist model of society. Not only was it against the Portuguese settlers (‘imperial domination’) and the Mozambicans who
had supported the Portuguese rule (Machel referred often to ‘the victory of the people over the forces of oppression and exploitation’), but it was also aimed at transforming social and economic relations (Lipschutz and Rasmussen 1986). The people would overthrow completely the inheritance of the colonial state that, after the country’s independence, was being somehow maintained by the native bourgeoisie (Parry 2004, 85). For Machel it was necessary to break away from the bourgeois culture and enforce the culture of the people.

The idea of unity of the people was ever present in Machel’s speeches (see e.g. Machel 1976; Sopa 2001). Because he was well aware of the dangers of tribalism in Mozambique and of the differences among the country’s many ethnic groups, he always presented the people as unitary while he strived to unite them around common goals and especially against common enemies: first, against colonialism and then against those who were ‘corrupt’, ‘opportunist’, ‘lazy’, or ‘recidivist’. It is interesting to note that cities were seen as places of corruption, in contrast to the correctness and purity of rural life.

In addition to the unitarian vision of the people, Machel targeted those who did not share his unitarian view of Mozambican society. After independence, when the ‘enemy Portugal’ was no longer relevant, Machel was not able to unite the entire country around his vision of establishing a socialist state in Mozambique; instead, he had to face a new opponent, the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) and, ultimately, civil war. RENAMO started as a militant political organisation and guerrilla movement in Mozambique and was founded in 1975 in Rhodesia in opposition to Machel’s FRELIMO (the Mozambique Liberation Front, which resulted from the merger of several nationalist groups into a single organisation and was founded in 1962 by Eduardo Mondlane as a nationalist independence movement) and its ideological stance. RENAMO was mostly an anti-Machel resistance movement. As Hanlon (1991) explains, ‘when FRELIMO started losing control, the response was a complex mix of populism and authoritarianism’ (1991, 27).

Context dictated that Machel would have to face different opponents throughout his political life. He commonly used the word enemy (see e.g. Lefanu 2012), which was a distinctive strategy employed in his speeches and in his specific framing of reality. Eduardo Mondlane (the first FRELIMO president assassinated in 1969) had already persuaded many to unite against a shared enemy (Salazar’s Portugal), and Machel commonly interpreted events through this logic. But the enemy was not only Salazar’s Portugal or RENAMO, which Machel often referred to as ‘enemies of the people’, but also several other enemies, vague or specific (e.g. the ‘enemy of the nation’, the ‘enemy of women’, etc.).

**Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe**

Mugabe, known internationally for his bitterly anti-colonial stance, was one African leader who saw no shame in associating himself with ‘populist nationalist rhetoric’ (Woolf 2017). Examples of his populist interventions, argues Mhlanga (2017), included his resolution to publicly overrule his finance minister’s decision to hold off bonus payments to civil servants due to a crippling economic downturn. Never the one to shy away from controversy and always eager to please ‘his people’, Mugabe declared in a national address that all government workers would receive their 13th cheque, to the utter disbelief and embarrassment of his minister. Buoyed by his uncompromising stance on the land reform, Mugabe’s economic populism was notable. In taking land from the white farmers, he followed Amin by using the need to economically empower the native population as a way of justifying his policies. Yet, the white farmers’ decision to financially back Mugabe’s fiercest political opponent (Morgan Tsvangirai) was largely perceived to be the main motive of his retaliatory move (Mutsvairo and Muneri 2019). When
the prices of foodstuffs sharply rose in 2007, Mugabe blamed the white business owners for using their businesses to effect a Western-backed regime change agenda. His response was to introduce price controls, which led to severe shortages. Some Western journalists, who Mugabe had long argued deliberately wrote false accounts to destroy his image, were also kicked out of the country.

Thus, in Mugabe’s populist agenda, there was always someone to blame. The key targets were journalists, opposition leaders and their supporters, businessmen, and Western leaders, all of whom, he argued, were keen to oust him because of his pro-black policies. African leaders – apart from Botswana’s Ian Khama, who Mugabe sharply rebuked at every given opportunity – did not interfere in Zimbabwe, arguing the Southern African country was a sovereign state that could deal with its own internal affairs. The non-interference of African leaders, just like with Amin in Uganda, gave Mugabe an unmatched conviction that he was indeed Africa’s true anti-colonial champion. He was also accused, like Amin was before, of ethnically targeting those opposed to his rule. But his supporters saw him as a liberation icon, someone who had empowered his people by giving them land previously owned by white people.

Mugabe used his intellect and charisma to administer his anti-Western populist agenda. Even those who opposed his politics sometimes could not help but admire him. One of those was Tendai Biti, a known figurehead of opposition politics in Zimbabwe, who reacted to news of Mugabe’s death by calling a man he said had tortured and jailed him the ‘founding father of our struggle’ (SABC 2019) while, contrastingly, a spokesman for the British government called Mugabe a ‘barrier to a better future’ (France24 2019). Tendai Biti had also praised Mugabe by suggesting he found ‘counsel and wisdom in him’ (Vava 2012).

Agenda-setting Malema, a vicious proponent of socialism, could represent Africa’s young and modern-day populists. According to Karimi (2012), he is a ‘populist, an opportunist, or both, depending on whom you ask’. Eloquent, confident, and tough-talking, the militant Malema rose to prominence in the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa’s ruling party’s youth wing. At first, nobody paid attention to his rise until he demanded, during ex-president Thambo Mbeki’s rule, that mines be nationalised and, in keeping with Mugabe’s acquisition of land for redistribution to black people, appealed for the confiscation of white farmland. In response, the media has sharply rebuked ‘toxic, destructive populism’ by Malema (Lincoln-Reader 2020). He does not try to hide radical, racially propelled, economic populism, which has been the face of his self-styled far-left Economic Freedom Fighters party. While he claims to have nothing against whites, he has issued racially charged statements on numerous occasions, recently declaring, ‘We are not calling for the slaughtering of White people – at least for now’ (York 2019).

His expulsion from the ANC came after he sang a song that openly called for the killing of a white farmer, but in 2013, he formed his own pan-Africanist party (Economic Freedom Fighters), which is now the third largest nationally in terms of parliamentary representation. Malema’s critics, who accuse him of deliberately inciting racism and anti-white prejudice against his opponents, have warned he lacks the credibility and political willpower to preside over an already racially divided nation, but his supporters, especially the young unemployed blacks, see him as the perfect answer to South Africa’s unequal society. This inequality seems to be at the centre of everything Malema and his party do, which is basically ‘fighting for equality not for blacks to oppress whites’ Cotterill (2019). Malema uses combative rhetoric to appeal to his supporters, especially the youths. He sees himself as the voice of the voiceless, particularly those who have failed to see the gains from the end of apartheid. He has also issued scathing attacks
on global icon Nelson Mandela for what he considers to be his pro-white policies, suggesting for instance that Mandela made a mistake by not prioritising free education when he took over power in 1994. There are some who consider Malema an ‘unapologetic fascist’ or a ‘dangerous politician’. Yet there are others who see him as a symbol of economic egalitarianism in an already deeply divided country.

**Populism and representation in Africa**

As Cheeseman (2018) notes, ‘it is not surprising that populist appeals are commonplace, given the context within which African political leaders operate’ (2018, 359). Weak party structures, the low political sophistication of most voters, and pervasive inequalities tend to emphasise the emergence of strong leaders with magnetic personalities and disruptive discourses. We examined four political leaders who have been successful in part because of these characteristics. Adding to these, they have also resorted to rhetorical strategies commonly known as populist, such as people-centrism, blame-shifting, or the ‘us versus them’ view of society. The populist, simplistic logic of the enemy is also prevalent in the discourse of all these political leaders. The identification of the ‘enemies of the people’, those who threaten the people’s rights and space, and exclusionary stances (e.g. against foreigners, religious groups, etc.) have been, in these cases, directly anchored in plans to revitalise the country’s economy.

The four cases described in this chapter also demonstrate how initially populism in Africa was mostly linked to anti-colonial politics and that later, it also emerged as a differentiation strategy and a response to governments that had become too detached from the population. The anti-elitism stance is thus consistently present, first against the colonisers and later against the ‘self-interested’ and ‘corrupt’ political leaders. The anti-colonial discursive appeal gave African populations promises of post-colonial glory in which racial tensions would cease to exist, and natives would have equal access to jobs and other opportunities. The belief that such promises have not been met has propelled a new brand of youthful political leaders, such as Malema, to prominence. But, as Sharra (2020) warns, the dominance of established mavericks like Malema has made it more difficult for many to come to terms with an emerging force of populist African political movements that are establishing themselves thanks to the advent of social media networks such as Facebook. These, he argues, need not be in the mainstream like Malema, but they use the internet to demand and sometimes secure change.

Notwithstanding existing prior identifications of populist political leaders in Africa (e.g. Resnick 2017; Cheeseman 2018), populism also has been used as an effective strategy for political mobilisation in different African countries (e.g. Thomson 2000; Resnick 2019). It is therefore useful to follow an approach that identifies the key characteristics of populist rhetoric and strategies and then investigate the extent to which different political actors make use of them (Stanyer et al. 2017), rather than just naming the examples of populist political actors who have been labelled as such. In Africa, where there is a tradition of strongmen leaders and instrumentalisation of the media is customary, elements that are deemed normal could be easily mistaken for populism if Western standards were applied.

As a belief-system influencing decision-making, populism can also be the idea that the people should be directly involved in political processes (e.g. the People’s Defence Committees in Ghana or the revolutionary committees in Burkina Faso in Sankara’s government). However, on the few occasions that such opportunity arose, governments held on to power and resisted the actual transfer of power to the people. Nationalist arguments have been used, too, but as excuses to strengthen national unity rather than to fragment the decision-making power, which could – in their view – jeopardise the country’s development or even peace. In fact, so far, this
type of African populist experiments have proved to be more useful as a method for the state to penetrate civil society than for civil society to penetrate the state (Thomson 2000, 43).

Although this is still an under-researched area of study in Africa, we can observe that similar ideological methods that have been reported in the West, such as engaging in pro-people rhetoric and proposing a Manichean view of society, have also been used by African political leaders. They may also cling to repressive media laws and policies because they fear dissent or alternative voices could threaten their power. Economy and exclusion are also relevant elements in their populist approach to politics. But there are also important singularities in the manifestations of populism in Africa, which are clearly related to the specificities of the context: the history of colonialism and how that legacy has affected political structures and identities. The varied ethnic composition of most of these countries also adds to the complexity, particularly in attempts to define the unitary ‘the people’ and determine who belongs to ‘the people’. In view hereof, populist leaders have primarily framed ‘the other’ as an outsider, an immigrant, or from a different race or have applied morality standards pointing the finger at those considered ‘lazy’ or ‘corrupt’.

While populist African leaders could display some similar tendencies among themselves, remarkable differences in approach can also been noted. For example, on a continent known for its long-time leaders, a populist leader in opposition has to adopt different tactics if he or she is to be elected because access to mainstream media is either limited or not available. As in other parts of the world, the development of social media has brought new opportunities for fringe politicians and for unmediated forms of political communication in Africa. Although attempts to censor online content and to control the internet by ruling politicians have been reported in several African countries, it is also expected that, in time, online media will function as important tools for other types of populist manifestations, this time from the grassroots and populations who feel poorly represented and not from personalistic, strong leaders.

References


