The influence of populist leaders on African democracy

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Since the post-independence era, populism has made inroads into the politics of sub-Saharan Africa. Populism is defined here as a political strategy involving direct ties by individual, charismatic politicians to large masses of unorganized constituents, the use of public performances that Ostiguy (Forthcoming) terms “flaunting of the low,” and an ideological rhetoric that denounces elitism (see Resnick 2017). Quintessential populists of the mid-1980s included Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, Captain Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, and Yoweri Museveni when he initially came to power in Uganda through a guerrilla campaign in 1986. All three military figures claimed they were leading “people’s revolutions” against corrupt incumbents. They often espoused a rhetoric against establishment elites, railed against structural forces that maintained poverty and exclusion, and embraced outrageous antics to give them greater visibility to the public (see Carbone 2005; Harsch 2014; Resnick 2017; Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1989). However, such populists did not operate within democratic contexts and often suppressed the opposition or banned political parties entirely.

Three decades later, in the wake of democratic experiments that spread widely in the region during the 1990s, populism again became more pronounced in some countries. Some of the reasons for the more contemporary rise of populism include socioeconomic and demographic shifts that resulted in rising inequality, the growth of urban poverty, and the expansion of youth unemployment. Such patterns, along with disillusionment with democratic expectations, created the basis of grievances that could be capitalized on by savvy politicians.

While these drivers and manifestations of contemporary African populism have been detailed in some depth (see Cheeseman and Larmer 2015; Resnick 2014; Resnick 2015), the impact of populist governance on democratization in Africa has received scant attention. This chapter addresses this gap by examining the effects of populist leaders on political mobilization, party systems, and democratic institutions and competition. Empirically, the chapter focuses on Southern Africa where urbanization levels and inequality rates have been much higher than elsewhere in the region, often creating fertile ground for populist calls. More specifically, the chapter focuses on Zambia and South Africa where two populist leaders, the late Michael Sata and Jacob Zuma, became president of those countries in 2011 and 2009, respectively. While both countries transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s, Zambia is
considered a multi-party system even as South Africa’s post-apartheid era has been dominated by one party, the African National Congress (ANC).

Despite these differences, common patterns are observed in both countries regarding the influence of populism. On the one hand, the rise of populist leaders has resulted in a growing centralization of power around the presidency, a disregard for the rule of law and transparency, and greater repression of the independent media. These dynamics have resulted in party fractionalization, leading to party defections from Sata’s original Patriotic Front (PF) and internal factions within the ANC. On the other hand, the rise of these leaders reinvigorated the importance of poverty and inequality in the policy space and enhanced public participation in the political sphere. Furthermore, they have had an important legacy on opposition parties within their respective countries, which have often used populist rhetoric and tactics to mobilize constituents.

In other words, populism in the African context can generate some of the same tensions with liberal democracy that have been observed elsewhere in the world. Specifically, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) emphasize that because of its emphasis on the will of the majority, populism is essentially democratic. In this regard, they observe that populism can provide a voice to excluded constituencies and force greater accountability for marginalized issues and policies. At the same time, populism’s celebration of popular sovereignty can be contradictory to respect for the rule of law and the separation of powers that are characteristic of liberal democracies in particular. They hypothesize that even in consolidated democracies, populism in government can result in negative effects on the quality of democracy. Indeed, as seen in the following sections, many populist leaders may not be democratically inclined once they come into power.

Party politics in South Africa and Zambia: the ascendance of populism

The dynamics contributing to the rise of populist leadership in South Africa and Zambia have been broadly similar. With strong economic bases in the capital-intensive mining sector, both countries are burdened by high employment rates, particularly among the youth, and large income gaps between rural and urban populations. Zambia’s period of structural adjustment during the 1990s led to the collapse of the domestic manufacturing sector and made the country increasingly dependent on its volatile copper sector, concentrating many in the low-paid informal economy. Although South Africa has a more diversified economy, the legacy of apartheid has resulted in unequal access to proper housing and services as well as disproportionate education quality and job access. Inequality is among the highest in the world, ranging from a Gini coefficient of 0.50 in Zambia to 0.64 in South Africa (StatsSA 2017; World Bank 2015). Rapid urbanization, vast inequalities, and stubbornly high youth unemployment combined to create a potent mixture of grievances for citizens in these countries during the 2000s.

These demographic and socioeconomic trajectories coincided with important shifts in the party systems as well. By the mid-2000s, both countries had experienced at least a decade with democracy. In 1991, Zambia transitioned from a one-party state to a multi-party democracy with the victory of Frederick Chiluba of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in that year’s presidential elections. Ten years later, Chiluba’s efforts to change the constitution to run for a third presidential term prompted many splinter parties from the MMD, including Sata’s PF. Even as the macroeconomy rebounded under Chiluba’s successor, Levy Mwanawasa, many in Zambia’s urban areas did not personally experience a change in economic circumstances (see Resnick and Thurlow 2017). Sata capitalized on these conditions in the country’s 2006 elections, appealing directly to the urban poor in the capital of Lusaka and the
main cities on the Copperbelt. Voter turnout in those elections was almost 71 percent, higher than at any other point in the country’s history, including the historic 1991 elections. In each subsequent election, Sata won large majorities in the cities and ultimately captured the presidency in 2011.

South Africa’s democratic transition from apartheid in 1994 was dominated by the prominence of the country’s main liberation movement, the ANC. In contrast to Zambia’s presidential system, South Africa is a parliamentary democracy whereby political parties field lists of parliamentary candidates in elections. Originally founded in 1912, the ANC is particularly well organized with approximately 2,700 local branches that are involved in monthly meetings and recruitment drives. The branches constitute 90 percent of the members to the National Conference, which elects the party’s leader every four years and shapes the ANC’s policies (Darracq 2008).

Since 1994, the ANC has retained control of the presidency, with Nelson Mandela transitioning to Thabo Mbeki in 1999. Jacob Zuma was Mbeki’s vice-president between 1999–2005 until Mbeki forced him to resign due to his involvement in a fraud case. Mbeki’s tenure was cut short by a rift within the National Conference between his pro-capitalist, neo-liberal policies and the more leftist, interventionist policies favored more by the trade union wing of the ANC. In 2007, Zuma was able to unseat Mbeki in internal party elections as the party’s candidate for the subsequent elections in 2009. As the party’s presidential candidate, Zuma reinvigorated support for the ANC at a difficult time for the party. Specifically, the party’s vote share had been consistently declining due to both the emergence of the “Born Free” generation who did not grow up under apartheid and therefore lacked an affinity to the former liberation party, as well as a growing sense among the poor that the ANC was becoming increasingly distanced from their plight. Due to Zuma’s populist campaigning, voter turnout in the 2009 elections was 77 percent, and the ANC received a million more votes that it had received even a decade earlier (Resnick 2014).

The populist strategy that was so central to Sata’s and Zuma’s electoral success demonstrated a number of shared characteristics. First, the charismatic figures often relied on outrageous campaign antics or public performances that were intended to increase their accessibility to voters and to keep them in the public eye. For example, Sata, nicknamed King Cobra because of his venom toward his political enemies, registered the PF for the 2008 elections by arriving at the High Court in a speedboat since a boat was the symbol of the party. In the 2011 electoral campaign, Sata employed a local rapper to create the song Donchi Kubeba, encouraging citizens to accept bribes and other handouts from other political parties but not tell that they would ultimately vote for the PF. Zuma frequently lived up to his nickname of Msholozi, or dancer, for actively singing and dancing during his campaign rallies. His signature song was, “Bring Me My Machine Gun,” a famous anti-apartheid song that was banned after 1994 because of its association with racism and violence.

Secondly, they espoused pro-poor and anti-establishment messages that promised to end economic marginalization and create employment, particularly for the youth. Sata’s message of “more jobs, less taxes, and more money in your pockets” and his condemnation of foreign “infestors” strongly resonated with Zambia’s urban poor, particularly street hawkers, informal market vendors, and bus and taxi drivers. He also promised to end harassment of informal workers and provide basic services in urban shanty compounds. As recognition of where his main constituents were located, he launched most of his campaign rallies in Lusaka’s low-income compounds even as his competitors chose hotels or other conference centers (see
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Resnick 2014). Zuma similarly campaigned heavily in South Africa’s urban townships and, through the ANC’s manifesto, prioritized job creation. Zuma’s underlying message was that the presidency of the technocratic Mbeki, rather than the ANC per se, was culpable for many of the problems for South Africa’s poor. Through Ride n’ Brai parties, which were impromptu barbeques at car washes complete with kwaito township music by popular DJs and free food, Zuma focused heavily on mobilizing the youth.

Thirdly, they tried to create what Barr (2009) characterizes as direct ties with the people, especially the poor, through a variety of tactics. One was through their use of the vernacular rather than English when campaigning with certain communities. For instance, Carton (2010: 34) observes the following about Zuma: “he is the people’s leader with a familiar touch. He conveys this touch to audiences versed in African languages by alluding to Zulu idioms and stories that draw metaphors and counsel from growing up in Nkandla” (Carton 2010: 34).

Another was their open-door policies to interact with constituents. A third and pronounced tactic was their unabashed flaunting of their anti-intellectual backgrounds. Zuma often referenced his background as a goat herder with no formal education in order to endear himself to the poor: “Zuma successfully portrayed himself as ‘poor,’ identifying his personal marginalization by former president Thabo Mbeki with the marginalization of the poverty-stricken masses” (Gumede 2009 see also Russell 2010).

Similarly, Sata often emphasized his grade 4 education because it both showed he could relate to the poor and because it often elicited derogatory claims from other parties. Guy Scott, the PF’s vice-president and Zambia’s vice-president from 2011–2015, observed:

He [Sata] likes the image that he’s uneducated. It brings out the worst in the educated elite. They say, “Honestly, a man with grade 4 [education], how can he run a country?” I mean, 99 percent of the voters are grade 4 [educated].

(cited in Resnick 2014: 81)

To further emphasize the point, they called one of the other main opposition leaders, Hakainde Hichilema, “calculator boy” due to his high level of education. Both men viewed themselves as their countries’ “saviors,” which evoked a perception that elections were not a mandate on their parties’ potential but rather on their individual capability to deliver on behalf of the masses. In fact, Sata viewed himself as the people’s liberator, proclaiming “Zambia needs a redeemer, Zambians want Moses to redeem [them] and I am the redeemer of Zambia!” (cited in Chellah 2006: 3).

In some ways, internal party dynamics both reflected and enabled these leaders to suggest a sense of superiority over established rules and procedures. Even as an opposition leader, Sata demonstrated a low tolerance for any dissent within the party, expelling members of parliament (MPs) who demonstrated any individual initiative.\(^2\) He only relented to internal party elections in 2011, a full decade after the party was established. Even though the ANC is much more institutionalized, the party is likewise accused of being internally undemocratic and extremely centralized (Lotshwao 2009). Members of the National Conference play no significant role in policymaking and due to the ANC’s emphasis on internal party discipline, members often wind up endorsing leadership positions that have already been negotiated by the party’s elite. Consequently, Lodge (2004: 210) has termed the Conferences as a “legitimating ritual.” Even back in 1996 when Zuma was ANC national chairperson, he condemned the party’s independent-minded members of parliament and lectured party delegates that “ANC leaders in government should not regard South Africa’s constitution as more important than the ANC” (cited in Lotshwao 2009: 910).
Authoritarian legacies of populist governance

As seen in the context of Latin America, populism that may give voice to the poor and marginalized during electoral campaigns often translates into executive overreach if populist leaders are ultimately elected (e.g., Ellner 2012). Indeed, this often manifests through a disdain of those institutions that demand executive accountability, such as the courts and the media. For example, in Ecuador, Rafael Correa interfered with the judiciary and therefore prevented journalists and activists from using the courts as a means of recourse (de la Torre and Lemos 2016). The pattern has proved no different in the African context, regardless of the party system.

Sata and the Patriotic Front in Zambia

In terms of social policy, Sata’s presidency was largely consistent with his campaign platforms. In office, the PF claimed that it was a “Caring Government” that put citizens first. Notably, less than three months in office, Sata issued a letter to all town clerks and city council secretaries in the country to request that they stop harassing street vendors with immediate effect (Times of Zambia 2011). In parliament, the PF minister for Local Government and Housing emphasized street vendors should not be thwarted from making a living and providing food for their families (GRZ 2012a). Keeping up one of his central campaign pledges, Sata doubled the royalty on mining from 3 to 6 percent in November 2011, justified as a way of distributing Zambia’s mineral wealth more equitably across its citizens (Mosley 2017).

In 2012, the PF government also passed the Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment Act to increase the minimum wage, provide retirement packages, and offer healthcare benefits to civil servants (GRZ 2012b). The rise in the minimum wage resulted in about a 45 percent increase in civil servant salaries (Whitworth 2015). More interventionist labor policies were evident when Sata refused to allow one of the main mining companies, Konkola Copper Mines, to lay off 2000 workers despite the company’s looming insolvency. The labor minister further noted that “as government, we are not going to allow job cuts,” requiring permission to be granted before any government employee was dismissed (cited in Mosley 2017: 45). In addition, the 2014 budget aimed to scale up the government’s contribution to the social cash transfer scheme by over 700 percent to help the most vulnerable (see GRZ 2013). These initiatives were also complemented by expensive, large-scale road construction and rehabilitation projects. These included Link Zambia 8000, which involved constructing 8,200 km of roads throughout the country at the approximate cost of $5.6 billion, and PAVE 2000, which involved paving urban township roads to avoid flooding in the rainy season (Sardanis 2014).

Yet, during his time in office from 2011–2014, Sata used extreme measures to corrupt the country’s burgeoning democratic institutions in order to favor the PF. Nowhere was this more apparent than with regards to the judiciary, which was alternately undermined and overburdened to achieve Sata’s political objectives. Almost immediately after assuming office, he replaced most of the country’s top judges. This continued into 2012 when he expelled the Chief Justice and three other judges for decisions against his political allies, though he claimed it was to promote women into the judicial positions. Suspiciously, however, the new female appointee was Sata’s cousin and she was above the mandated retirement age of 65.

The judiciary was again involved when Sata attempted to de-register the MMD and declare the party’s parliamentary seats vacant by claiming the former ruling party had not paid its registration fees for 20 years. When the attempted de-registration ultimately was overthrown by the courts, Sata found other ways of securing a parliamentary majority for the PF. This included challenging in the courts the results of the 2011 parliamentary elections in some
constituencies and enticing MPs from the MMD and other opposition parties with deputy minister positions. Both moves prompted at least 35 by-elections in 2012 and 2013 that resulted in PF victories. In addition, he employed the Public Order Act to prevent the opposition from holding rallies or meetings. The colonial-era Act allows the police to decide whether rallies can be held and who can speak during them. The Act had been used by the MMD in the past to rein in opposition parties (see VonDoepp 2009), and Sata had decried the Act during the decade that the PF spent in opposition. During his volte-face, Sata stated, “When you are in government is when you realize that there will be no government when there’s no sanity in society. There will be no government when there’s no order in society” (cited in Sardanis 2014: 263).

Civil society was equally targeted by Sata. He filed multiple defamation lawsuits against independent news outlets and by 2013, his government was actively harassing independent journalists and media outlets. News websites such as the Zambian Watchdog and Zambia Reports were blocked by certain internet service providers. In addition, non-governmental organizations were forced to register with the NGO Board under the Ministry of Community Development, which required an annual fee of K200, an initial K500 registration fee, and police clearance by all office bearers within the NGOs.

Yet, beyond undermining the judiciary, parliament, and civil society, Sata’s most long-standing and destructive behaviors were with regards to the rank-and-file within his own PF. Ministerial volatility was rife due to frequent cabinet reshuffles, and alliances were often kept in flux due to his paranoia about any one politician becoming too powerful. The result of this tenure insecurity among government officials was “a climate of servility and sycophancy and undeclared civil war within the senior ranks, with everybody trying to show greater loyalty than his colleague” (Sardanis 2014: 245).

Specifically, by 2013, two factions became increasingly apparent. One faction, known as “The Cartel,” consisted of many of the PF’s stalwarts who worked with Sata from the party’s infancy in 2001 and supported a more radical, statist policy agenda. At the time, these included the vice-president (Guy Scott), the Justice Minister and PF General Secretary (Wynter Kabimba), PF spokesperson (George Challah), and the editor-in-chief of The Post newspaper (Fred M’membe). Another faction, led by mostly those from the Bemba ethnic group, included the Minister of Defense (Geoffrey Bwalya Mwamba), the Minister of Home Affairs (Edgar Lungu), and Minister of Finance and Sata’s uncle (Alexander Chikwanda). Initially, Kabimba and Mwamba were both perceived as potential successors to Sata until Mwamba was expelled from the party and Chikwanda replaced him as a potential successor. Kabimba launched corruption inquiries into Chikwanda, which ultimately led to the former’s expulsion as well. Lungu, who had since taken up the defense portfolio in Mwamba’s absence, also then became justice minister and PF secretary general (Sanches 2015).

The fighting between these factions reached its crescendo when Sata died in October 2014. As acting president, Scott attempted to remove Lungu as Secretary General due to the latter’s violation of political campaigning before Sata’s funeral. However, when violence broke out in the capital city between youth supporting different factions of the party, Lungu was reinstated. At the party’s General Conference, Lungu was ultimately selected as the PF’s flagbearer for the January 2015 presidential by-elections during which he narrowly defeated by 27,000 votes the main opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND). Consequently, many key PF officials, such as Scott, Kabimba, and Mwamba, defected to other parties.

In addition to the PF’s implosion, Lungu’s presidency was bedeviled by the growing popularity of the UPND and the crumbling macroeconomy partially caused by Sata’s massive
expenditure increases to achieve his populist promises. In fact, while Zambia’s presidential elections are usually held in September or October, Lungu moved them earlier in 2016 so that the inevitable austerity policies anticipated from a deal with the International Monetary Fund could be postponed until after the elections. In a country that had been widely lauded for leading the vanguard of democratization across Africa in 1991, the decline in respect for democratic norms in the run-up to the 2016 elections was significant. 

Notable incidents include the closure of the main independent newspaper, *The Post*, which had been running since 1991. Although the closure was ostensibly because the paper had not adequately paid its taxes to the Zambian Revenue Agency, many pointed out that many pro-government newspapers were also in arrears but continued to operate (*The Economist* 2016). Another area of concern was the severe restrictions placed on the UPND’s campaign efforts, which were repeatedly thwarted by the police. More than 50 incidents of electoral violence between cadres for the PF and UPND were recording in the six months preceding the elections, and ultimately, the Electoral Commission suspending campaigning in the capital of Lusaka due to the violence (see Resnick 2016).

After just barely passing the electoral threshold to avoid a second-round run-off, Lungu intensified his attacks on the UPND by first suspending 48 UPND MPs in March 2017 after they boycotted his State of the Nation address. This of course removed a key source of parliamentary opposition. Even more extreme, Lungu arrested UPND leader Hichilema for treason in April 2017 when the latter refused to move his car for the presidential motorcade; a criminal conviction disqualifies any citizen from running for office. Lungu’s assertions in 2017 that he would run for a third term in 2021 further exacerbated the sense of crisis and political instability initiated by Sata. This culminated in Lungu’s declaration of a state of emergency in mid-2017 as violence between the PF and UPND manifested in a series of arson attacks in urban markets where the PF’s major constituency of informal workers are located. Therefore, Sata’s legacy was partially squandered by an autocratic management of his party that reflected a disproportionate sense of his own importance.

**The ANC’s populist turn under Zuma**

South Africa’s parliamentary system offers some protection against the same excessive level of presidential meddling as witnessed in Zambia. Nevertheless, Jacob Zuma’s tenure in office has been characterized by a creeping intrusion into the independent media and other political institutions and growing threats to the ANC’s unity, both within the party and across its ruling tripartite alliance with the Confederation of Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

Soon after entering office, Zuma disbanded the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), otherwise known as the Scorpions, which was a highly effective, independent anti-corruption unit. The move was widely seen as a reprisal for the NPA’s previous role in unveiling Zuma’s involvement in an arms deal. In addition, Zuma proceeded with signing the Protection of Information Bill in November 2011, which enables the state to restrict access to public information and prevents the press from investigating corruption (Guha 2013). He also backed a proposal to regulate journalists’ work via the creation of a media appeals tribunal. Furthermore, his government has used legislation known as the National Key Points Act, which is a remnant of the apartheid era, to restrict reporting on locations that are significant for national security; more than 200 sites were deemed by the police minister to be restricted under Zuma’s tenure. In addition, the appointment of Hlaudi Motsoeneng as the Chief Operating Officer of the national news agency, the South African Broadcasting Company
(SABC), was widely interpreted as an effort to skew the broadcaster toward more pro-Zuma reporting. Even after it was revealed that Motsoeneng lied about his qualifications and abused his power to grant himself large raises, Zuma did not remove him (Southall 2016). When a parliamentary inquiry revealed that the Minister of Communications was also culpable for the appointment and recommended removing her from cabinet, Zuma responded by defying parliament and actually promoting her to co-chair of the Inter-ministerial Committee on Communication. Klug (2016) labels these and other attempts to manipulate the rule of law for political gain as “lawfare” and observes that such behavior has become more pronounced since Zuma entered office.

Zuma’s populism was never strongly ideologically oriented but more of a political strategy. As such, he wound up depending on an eclectic coalition for support when he first ousted Mbeki for the ANC presidency in 2007 and became president in 2009. Such a coalition depended on leftists from the South African Communist Party and COSATU, radicals from the ANC youth league, and Zulu-ethno-nationalists concerned about maintaining socially conservative policies. Maintaining this coalition has involved providing patronage in exchange for personal loyalty (Cooper 2015).

Indeed, a flagrant increase in corruption is one of the most extreme outcomes of the Zuma presidency. Even before becoming president, Zuma faced 783 criminal charges for fraud, corruption, and racketeering (Southall 2011). However, having portrayed himself as a “man of the people” and a poor goat herder, it was revelations of Zuma’s expenditure of more than $23 million of state resources on his private Nkandla residence that proved particularly troublesome to South Africans. Only when a report published by the Public Protector revealed the extent of the upgrades did Zuma agree to partially repay the costs (Madonsela 2014). Yet, this proved only the tip of the iceberg as it was already known that since 2010, Zuma and his family owned more than 100 company directorships, and more than half of those had been registered since Zuma had become president of the ANC (Southall 2011). As observed by Southall (2011: 625), “The merging of party and state under the ANC has provided for the increasing criminalization of authority and power, a tendency which has gained serious momentum under Jacob Zuma.”

The lines between business and the state were blurred further through revelations that a prominent business family, known as the Guptas, were influencing Zuma’s policies and even selection of cabinet members, including most importantly the Minister of Finance. Two Ministers of Finance, Nhlanhla Nene and Pravin Gordhan, were unilaterally removed by Zuma due to their opposition to Zuma’s excessive expenditures and particularly his aspirations to build a nuclear energy plant. Procurement deals for the energy project were believed to benefit the Guptas and other Zuma loyalists. The cabinet removals were done without consultation with the ANC, demonstrating Zuma’s growing efforts to even bypass his own party. More generally, South Africa under Zuma witnessed a growth in “tenderpreneurs,” referring to those who build their fortunes by winning lucrative contract tenders for building roads or other infrastructure projects based on their connections to ANC members rather than through an independent procurement process (see Beresford 2015).

The impacts of this have undermined unity within the ANC and its tripartite alliance in a number of visible ways. In the 2012 elections of ANC party president at the Mangaung conference, Zuma was challenged by Kgalema Motlanthe, who had served as interim national president after Mbeki was removed in 2007 and before Zuma was elected in 2009. Internal candidate selection processes, which had been relatively transparent, democratic, and rules-oriented in the past, deteriorated significantly with widespread reports of vote rigging, electoral malpractice, and false accreditation to delegates attending the conference (Cooper 2015). Secondly, COSATU has become increasingly critical of the ANC as it has
continued to follow the conservative macroeconomic policies that Zuma promised to abandon in 2007 at the Polokwane conference and as respect for civil liberties declines (see Pillay 2011). Thirdly, the election for the new ANC president is riven by an intense rivalry between the current vice-president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who opposes how Zuma has run the party and undermined its credibility, and Zuma’s ex-wife, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. The latter is Zuma’s preferred successor as it is believed she will be less likely to prosecute him for corruption charges. The internal political battle, coupled with the growing strength of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) opposition parties, threatens to split the party or at the very least, undermine its historic dominance.

The latter scenario was already born out in a number of ways. In the 2014 elections, the party increasingly depended on rural voters for support (see Booysen 2014). This was notable given that the urban poor had been a key constituency for Zuma’s populist mobilization in 2009. This trend became more pronounced in the 2016 local government elections, which witnessed the ANC losing for the first time since the end of apartheid its hold in four of the country’s eight metropolitan municipalities, including in the cities of Johannesburg and Tshwane, the latter of which contains Pretoria, South Africa’s executive capital.

In addition to formal manifestations of discontent with the ANC via elections, there were also more informal examples demonstrated by high levels of protests throughout the country. These include almost a doubling since Zuma was first elected in 2009 of service delivery protests in low-income urban areas (Turok 2014) as well as the “Fees must fall campaign” initiated by university students over the cost of higher education. More broadly, despite Zuma’s attempts to win over youth, especially during his 2009 campaign, recent studies of the “Born Free” generation find a lower affinity to the ANC than previous cohorts (see Kotze and Prevost 2015).

Ironically, though, despite popular disgruntlement with the party’s service delivery, many objective measures of poverty and well-being actually have improved during Zuma’s tenure. In 2010, Zuma established a National Planning Commission to help identify major developmental challenges facing the country. In turn, his government adopted the National Development Plan (NDP) in 2012 to help eliminate poverty and reduce inequality in the country by 2030. Among other indicators, the NDP required scaling up the country’s existing social protection system, which is the largest in Africa. Between 2009 and 2016, the number of social grants distributed increased by 4 million, with approximately 92 percent of older poor persons covered by the country’s old-age grant and 61 percent of poor households received child support grants (StatsSA 2017). Moreover, the share of households connected to the electricity grid has increased from 82 to 85 percent between 2009 and 2013 while those linked to standard sanitation facilities increased from 72 to 77 percent during the same period (see StatsSA 2014). Poverty figures also indicated that the number of people living in extreme poverty in the country declined by three million between 2009 and 2015 (StatsSA 2017). These general trends reflect that despite the growing corruption and negative governance impacts of Zuma’s tenure, they did not necessarily undermine the ANC’s commitment to service delivery or pro-poor outcomes.

Zuma’s erstwhile populism has been taken up, to even more extreme degrees, by Julius Malema, the leader of the EFF and former leader of the ANC’s Youth League before he was expelled by Zuma. Malema had long been one of Zuma’s biggest supporters, even claiming in the 2009 election campaign that he would kill on Zuma’s behalf. Malema gained widespread notoriety by singing *Dubul iBhuni* (“Shoot the Boer”) at an ANC rally, which is an old liberation song referring to killing white Afrikaner farmers.
After comparing Zuma’s leadership to that of his stolid predecessor, Thabo Mbeki, and attempting to incite regime change in neighboring Botswana, an ANC disciplinary committee expelled Malema from the party in 2012. Malema made his political comeback in 2013 by announcing the creation of the EFF in Marikana, South Africa. The location was symbolic; in August 2012, more than 30 miners were killed by the police at the Marikana platinum mine during a strike over pay and labor conditions. Malema took advantage of the circumstances to emphasize that the EFF aimed to achieve economic freedom for the working class. The EFF manifesto promises, among other things, to expropriate South Africa’s land (from mostly white farmers) without compensation for redistribution and nationalization of the mines. The EFF manifesto likewise promised to provide houses, sanitation, millions of sustainable jobs, and a minimum wage to reduce wage inequalities that are the legacy of apartheid.

Relatedly, Malema has often equated elitism with race. Even highly competent white South Africans with liberation credentials have been criticized by Malema for being appointed to bureaucratic positions that should have instead gone to “an African child” (cited in Vincent 2011: 7). By extension, the people Malema claims to represent are specifically poor, black South Africans, as evident from his 2014 campaign rally when he stated: “You must give the ANC a wake-up call. Black people your time is now. Political freedom without economic freedom is an incomplete freedom” (cited in Harding 2014). This is a major departure from the ANC, which has long espoused a commitment to nonracialism.

Compared with previous ANC breakaway parties in South Africa, such as Congress of the People (COPE), the EFF’s rhetoric and manifesto has attracted much more support from particularly poor, black voters. In the May 2014 elections, The EFF garnered over a million votes and 24 MPs from the EFF were elected, making it the third-largest party in parliament. It also became the principal opposition party in two of the country’s nine provinces. Following the tradition of Zuma and Sata, Malema relies on performances to mobilize voters and distinguish his party. For instance, he wears a red beret, reminiscent of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, to show his affinity with the working class. EFF MPs also arrive to parliament dressed up as miners and domestic workers, stating that they refuse “to conform to the conventional Western style dress code of suit and tie.” Since parliamentary meetings are nationally televised, being an MP has enabled him to gain further public notoriety for, among other things, lambasting the ANC’s policies and Zuma’s parliamentary statements. Notably, during Zuma’s 2015 State of the Nation address, EFF MPs instigated a fight on the parliamentary floor, leading to their removal by security agents. As a result of the 2016 local elections, the EFF had the position of kingmaker in many metropolitan areas, helping to decide which opposition party would govern in them.

Conclusions

Despite having very different political systems and degrees of party institutionalization, the South African and Zambian cases illustrate some common trends as an outcome of populist governance. Key among these is the threat to democratic institutions that are viewed as inconvenient. Populism as a campaign strategy involves placing a strong emphasis on the individual as above the party and, at the same time, one with the people. Yet, when populists come to power, this same tendency to prize charisma, showmanship, and direct ties to the people can lead to a disdain for political institutions and civil liberties that inhibit personal agendas, whether toward achieving radical policy goals or private enrichment. This has been clear in both countries where the judiciary, media, and even the legislature have been bypassed or manipulated. There is some concern that the same pattern of authoritarian
decision-making is repeating itself within the EFF; the party has been centralized around a so-called “war council” and central “command team” where decisions taken at the national level are imposed on lower structures of the party. Dissent within the party is not tolerated and consensus rarely pursued (see Whittles and Bendile 2017).

Moreover, the policy pronouncements of these populist leaders have proved difficult to adhere to in office without consequences. As Weyland (2001: 14) notes, “Political success therefore transforms populism into a different type of rule that rests on nonpopulist strategies. Populist leadership therefore tends to be transitory. It either fails or, if successful, transcends itself.” For instance, the Zambian case showed that the cost of adhering to pro-poor social and economic policies proved troubling for those outside of the PF’s “Cartel,” contributing to extreme factionalism within the party in the wake of Sata’s death. This example gives credence to Mbete’s (2016) claims that Malema’s decision not to join an opposition coalition after the 2016 municipal elections was clever and strategic. Directly governing in coalition with any party would require the EFF to rubber stamp ideological positions that its rhetoric denounces while also highlighting EFF councilors’ lack of competence in the technical areas required to run local government. Remaining in opposition ensures the party can continue to build its populist brand without compromise and without undermining internal unity over policy actions.

Both Zuma and Sata were on shaky ground, occupying no real ideological position. Given the greater institutionalization and grassroots structure of the ANC compared with the PF, Zuma has needed to rely on a fragile patchwork of alliances to retain his position. By comparison, the PF’s identity and success were entirely linked to Sata who ruled the PF with a tight grip. His death, like that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, left the party he founded in disarray. His successor, Lungu, lacks legitimacy and has needed to find other ways to unify the PF, which has manifested through relentless attacks on the opposition UPND. Undoubtedly, the shaky foundations of these alliances have been exacerbated in the wake of macroeconomic crises in both countries that reduces patronage benefits to political elites.

Nonetheless, populism has left some positive impacts as well. First, both Sata and Zuma helped increase voter turnout, creating a sense of enthusiasm among otherwise demobilized voters. Secondly, they upset the traditional party establishments, and represented important turning points for intra- and inter-party competition in their respective countries’ democratic histories. Finally, they brought the concerns of the poor to the forefront of the policy agenda. In this way, their populism represents some of the same contradictory patterns, particularly providing a voice for the voiceless when out of office while undermining democratic institutions when governing, observed in other areas of the world.

Notes

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1 Hereafter, the region will just be referred to as “Africa.”
2 For instance, in 2007, 27 MPs from the PF participated in a national conference to revise the Constitution. This was in direct contravention to orders from Sata who had feared the conference was biased toward the MMD. The MPs were expelled from the party.
3 Such positions are accompanied by large perks, including cars, housing, and other allowances.
4 Crossing the party floor in Zambia automatically results in an MP’s seat being declared vacant and requires by-elections.
5 Despite efforts at reform by the Law Association of Zambia to challenge the Act in the High Court, the Act withstands.
6 This was despite one important area of progress, which was the passing of a new constitution in early 2016 and the inclusion of a 50%+1 clause for winning presidential elections; such a clause had long been demanded by civil society as a means of increasing the legitimacy of winning candidates.

7 “Born Free” is the term given to those who were born after 1994 and therefore never lived under apartheid.

8 Ibid.


References


