Routledge Handbook of Global Populism

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Populism in Africa and the potential for “ethnically blind” politics

Publication details

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Published online on: 03 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Nic Cheeseman. 03 Sep 2018, Populism in Africa and the potential for “ethnically blind” politics from: Routledge Handbook of Global Populism Routledge
Accessed on: 09 Sep 2023

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When journalists and commentators state that populism is on the rise, they usually have the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of prominence of Nigel Farage, former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), in mind. But there has also been a spread of populist strategies in the global south that is just as significant for the countries concerned. Indeed, it has become common for media commentators, academics and even comedians to draw analogies between Trump and African leaders over the past twelve months, a political meme that reached its apogee in October 2015 when a comedy sketch by Trevor Noah, the South African presenter of the *Daily Show*, depicted Trump as the “perfect African president”. In the clips that followed, which have been widely circulated on the internet, Noah juxtaposed some of Trump’s quips on the campaign trail with footage of African dictators including Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe and Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi.

Of course, Trevor Noah’s comments were lighthearted, but they nonetheless speak to a set of widely held assumptions about African politics, namely that it features more than its fair share of populist rabble-rousers. In recent years, this sentiment has also found expression in the form of a number of well-received academic analyses. Giovanni Carbone has carefully documented the way in which the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, uses “antipolitics as a legitimizing strategy” (2008: 77), while Zenobia Ismail (2015) has documented the rise of populism in “Southern Africa’s dominant party states”. Similarly, Danielle Resnick (2010) has written insightfully about the rise of populist leaders capable of mobilizing a mass support base in urban areas in Kenya and Zambia. In all of these cases, leaders have sought to rally support by deploying classic populist tropes: the reification of the common man, the demonization of elites and expertise, and the claim to be one with the people.

Partly because the populist label has been deployed so widely it is often used inconsistently and researchers have not always been careful to explain precisely what exactly is and is not populist about a given leader. In line with the findings of Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski’s literature review on this topic (2013), the term has often been applied somewhat uncritically to left leaning leaders who advocate more radical solutions to the challenges facing their countries, but has also been used by other authors to describe a very different dynamic of rural conservatism. At the same time, in the media, blogs, and more general
treatments of the continent, there has also been a noticeable tendency to deploy populism as catch-all concept in which it effectively becomes a rather empty way of describing leaders and policies with any kind of popular appeal.

Such depictions are unhelpful because they obscure the fact that what really marks a leader out as a populist is their self-identification with the “common man” and promise to defend the interests of the “pure people” against a “corrupt elite” that has manipulated power to pursue its own narrow self-interest (Mudde 2004: 543). This may be operationalized in different ways with different degrees of emphasis, but it is the claim to be able to represent and embody the interests of “el pueblo” that represents the defining feature of the populist approach (Levitsky and Roberts 2011: 6–7).

However, while advocating for a more careful and precise application of the concept of populism in sub-Saharan Africa, this chapter also discusses the extent to which elements of populist practice permeate the campaigns of a wide range of leaders. As Kevin Deegan-Krause and Tim Haughton have argued (2009), it is not helpful to treat populism as if it is a binary variable in which leaders either are populist or are not. Instead, we need to recognize that there is clearly a sliding scale of populism: most leaders use at least some populist appeals in their campaigns, but some leaders are more populist than others. Evaluating the policies, strategies and image of parties, prime ministers and presidents against a populist scale is particularly appropriate in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is not clear that a purely populist approach is compatible with a political context in which a great deal of electoral mobilization occurs along ethnic lines. 2 Although the weakness of party structures encourages leaders to use populist messages in order to connect directly to voters, the tendency to combine this with exclusive appeals that privilege certain communities means that there is a limit to how broadly “popular” they can be.

While it is important to be clear about what counts as populism, and what does not, I resist the temptation to impose restrictive criteria on exactly how populism must be expressed. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013: 14) find that there are three main ways that academics understand populism: as an ideology, as a discursive style, and as a form of political mobilization. One of the reasons that research in this area is beset with confusion and disagreement about the classification of leaders and regimes is that there has been a tendency for academics to select one of these lenses and discount the others. To avoid adding to the confusion, and to do justice to the variety of populist strategies at play – and the diverse ways in which these impact on everyday politics – this chapter recognizes the multifaceted nature of populist leadership. While some populists have coherent ideas but are not great public orators, others have the “common touch” but are not intellectually coherent. Given this, developing a richer understanding of how populism is deployed requires us to consider the extent to which a given leader can be considered to be populist along each of the dimensions that Gidron and Bonikowski identify.

In reviewing the potential for populism in the African context, I draw on recent work with Miles Larmer that has identified a number of “ethnopopulist” parties that seek to combine the “ethnic” appeal of party leaders within their own communities, especially in rural areas, in addition to a broader populist message that is usually most effective in cosmopolitan urban constituencies (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015: 23). The fate of such parties is telling, because the tension between these two very different types of appeal tends to undermine the viability of their campaign, preventing leaders from achieving electoral success on the basis of the kind of cross-ethnic “inclusionary populism” that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) describe in Latin America. As a result, it is not clear that the rise of populism will promote a new form of “ethnically blind” politics that revolves around cleavages other than communal identity.

The chapter ends by discussing the conditions under which populist appeals are most likely to be effective and the prospect for these conditions to become more common in the coming years.
Scholars such as Resnick (2010, 2013) have depicted populism as a largely urban phenomenon, born of the slums and lower-income areas of capital cities. Although this argument risks overlooking the potential for rural populism, which has played a prominent role in both the United States and a number of African countries, there is strong evidence that the feasibility of a party running a “pure” populist election campaign is related to the degree of urbanization, among other factors. Given this, the remarkable process of population growth that is currently taking place, which will see the continent go from being predominantly rural to predominately urban, is only likely to encourage the further spread of populist strategies in the future.

### Populism in the African context

It is not surprising that populist appeals are commonplace, given the context within which African political leaders operate. Although there is significant variation in terms of the structure and dynamics of the continent’s political systems, parties tend to be weak, election campaigns often have limited programmatic content, and the capacity to communicate messages via television is limited to urban areas. As a result, political aspirants continue to rely heavily on delivering highly targeted messages through face-to-face meetings to get the vote out. It is for this reason that recent research by Dan Paget has found that campaign rallies are more important in Africa than anywhere else in the world (2016). Under such conditions, populist forms of political communication and organization, which do not rely on the existence of strong state or party structures, are likely to thrive. However, efforts to describe the kind of populism that has emerged in Africa have not always been fully successful.

In part, this is because the literature has variously understood populism through different combinations of the three approaches identified by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013: 14) – as an ideology, as a discursive style, and as a form of political mobilization – without always recognizing that which framework one embraces significantly shapes both the classification of political leaders and the understanding of their strategies. Following Cas Mudde, Gidron and Bonikowski suggest that one of the most common ways of viewing populism is as a thin ideology; “a set of ideas characterized by an antagonism between the people and the elite” (2013: 6). This kind of ideational approach emphasizes the intellectual content of populist theories, although it should not be taken to imply that they are internally consistent, or that all populist world views are the same. However, many authors prefer to downplay the ideological, in part because populist leaders often appear to be more opportunistic than principled, preferring to frame populism as a discursive style. According to Kazin (1995), for example, populism is less an ideology than a rhetorical device based on emphasizing the difference between “them” and “us”. A third body of literature also recognizes the rhetorical power of populism, but shifts focus to instead emphasize “populism as a political strategy” (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013: 10). Raul Madrid (2008), for example, explains the potential for populist policies to mobilize anti-system sentiments by promising widespread redistribution of economic opportunities.

Failure to fully grasp the various ways that researchers have conceptualized populist politics, and to keep them in mind, has created a tendency for different scholars to talk past one another. Some of this conceptual confusion is revealed by the reception of P. L. E. Idahosa’s 2004 book, *The Populist Dimension to African Political Thought*. Given the lack of research on this topic, Idahosa’s attempt to conceptualize populism as a political ideology in order to demonstrate that a populist outlook unites the thought of writers and leaders such as Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Julius Nyerere, represented a significant contribution to the field. However, in order to make this case Idahosa relied on a definition of populism that has proved to be highly controversial. Drawing inspiration from African and Russian literatures
and examples, he conceptualized populism as “an emancipatory ideology based upon a specific conception of production relations”, giving it a distinctly socialist outlook (2004: 15). Idahosa also relied heavily on a distinction between nationalism and populism, in which nationalists paper over class differences while populists support “the peasant masses”. Other scholars proved to be less persuaded by this conceptualization. As Thomas Blaser has written, Idahosa’s analysis neglects the fact that “populism is not only the domain of the left”, while his “distinction between nationalism and populism falters on the eclecticism of daily political discourse and policy making” (2007: 1).

Despite Idagaso’s best efforts, the tendency of the literature to treat African politics as if it was an ideology-free zone, combined with the focus of recent work on the personalization of politics, meant that few researchers followed his example and took up the challenge of analyzing African populism as a system of political thought. Instead, most recent scholarship has typically focused on populism as a discursive style and as a political strategy.

Indeed, Africanists have tended to overlook the distinction between these two approaches, and for good reason. In a continent in which leaders mainly communicate with voters through rallies and through personal networks, discursive style is a political strategy. Thus, although Carbone concludes that “neither Museveni nor his regime are fully-fledged examples of ‘anti-political neo-populism’”, he locates a populist dimension in the president’s “ever more plebiscitarian and ‘pro-people’ discourse” (2008: 3). Similarly, Resnick identifies a number of populist practices in recent presidential campaigns in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, finding that “[Michael] Sata, [Raila] Odinga, and [Jacob] Zuma all utilized populist strategies that involved the fusion of charisma with policy promises oriented toward the priorities of the growing urban poor” (2010: 24, see also 2013).

Resnick’s analysis raises a broader question that could be asked of much of the recent literature: what is the criteria for defining a particular leader, party or slogan as populist? The standards that we apply to evaluating populism are particularly important because if the term is applied too liberally it loses meaning. At present, there is a problematic tendency to describe a given election campaign or manifesto as being populist simply because it includes claims or statements that are broadly popular. This is unhelpful, as while all leaders want to maintain their popularity, only some of them use populist techniques to do so. During a period of national economic crisis, for example, the promotion of technocratic leaders with specific expertise may receive broad popular support, but this does not make their rise “populist”. However, it often proves very difficult to establish a dividing line between what is and is not populist, in part because many leaders and parties that are at root conservative, or catch-all, or single-issue, integrate a select number of populist messages into their campaigns. In turn, the difficulty of agreeing on a common threshold has led to a remarkably broad range of slogans, ideas, leaders and policies being described as populist that do not fit comfortably within any of the different ways of conceptualizing populism identified by Gidron and Bonikowski.

One way out of this conundrum is to abandon an attempt to categorize the world into leaders that are, and are not, populist, and instead to think about them as being positioned on a spectrum in which the key question is not whether a leader is populist, but what proportion of a party’s policies and appeals are underpinned by a populist logic. As Deegan-Krause and Haughton argue, “the concept of populism need not be consigned to the conceptual trashcan if used as an adjective rather than as a noun and as a scale rather than a binary choice” (2009: 838). This approach has a number of advantages, not least that it recognizes that “allowing that all parties may use populist appeals to some extent” (2009: 822). However, it also carries certain dangers, most notably that researchers will not be careful enough to distinguish between campaigns with negligible populist content and those that are dominated by it.
Given this, it is important to follow Deegan-Krause and Haughton’s lead by empirically assessing policies and speeches for populist content within a comparative framework. Only by working in this way can we identify the conditions under which populism is most likely to be tried, and to be successful.

Resnick’s focus on the urban poor represents a valuable step in this direction, because it marshals a range of different data and suggests that populist appeals are more likely to resonate, and hence more likely to be used, in densely populated cities and towns. This is one reason why much of the literature that has been written about populism in Africa has focused on the southern part of the continent, where inequality and a history of urbanization have given rise to a more radicalized population that can be more easily reached and organized. In this vein, Larmer and Fraser (2007) document the rise to political prominence of Zambia’s Michael Sata, who used a populist strategy to go from being a political also-ran to the country’s fifth president in the space of little more than a decade. To achieve this remarkable transformation, Sata carefully targeted his appeals to communities in towns and cities that, by virtue of the country’s history of mining, trade union activism, and urban poverty, were particularly likely to be responsive to his argument that the state could and should play a role in transforming the condition of the masses.

Larmer and Fraser’s analysis is particularly important because it explicitly makes the case that populism is often both a political strategy and a discursive style, and provides a strong argument as to why the two are inherently linked. More specifically, they argue that Sata’s populist political policies were able to rally disaffected and disenfranchised Zambians to his side because they were given credibility by his intense and rabble-rousing speaking style (2007: 613). By launching into vociferous attacks on his opponents and ending his routines by tearing up a cabbage – chosen to symbolize the then-president Levy Mwanawasa, who Sata nicknamed “the cabbage” after he suffered a stroke – the opposition leader made believable the notion that he was a man of action capable of overthrowing the status quo (2007: 629–630). In this way, his discursive style was critical to the success of his populist message and strategy.

Fraser has subsequently expanded on this analysis, drawing on Benjamin Moffitt’s (2016) work to suggest that we should understand the campaign of the Patriotic Front in 2006 as being “populist on the basis that it used political theatre to construct antagonistic social identities” (Fraser 2017: 457). As part of this greater focus on the performative dimension of politics, Fraser persuasively argues that what gives populist communication its power is the active engagement and participation of the public. Thus, populist theatre “does not simply involve politicians performing to passive, leader-worshipping masses. The bodies and voices of the audience are also brought on stage; ‘the people’ are encouraged to perform to themselves” (2017: 463). While recognizing that this theatre was still enacted with a view to “creating and policing a moral boundary between the people and power” (2017: 464), Fraser also points out that this is not always successful. Precisely because populism as a discursive style involves mass participation, it is particularly vulnerable to apathy and public disappointment. Thus, Fraser concludes by considering what happened after the country’s ‘populist moment’ had passed, reflecting that “we might describe the Zambian scene as ‘post-populist’: politicians are still keen to try on populist costumes, but the people have increasingly left them alone and insecure on the stage” (2017: 470).

However, while the recent focus on urban populism has generated many valuable insights, it has also led to the relative neglect of rural populism. This is unfortunate, because the wider literature tells us that some of the earliest forms of populism emerged in rural settings, and variants of rural populism are alive and well in Africa. In Ghana, for example, President J. J. Rawlings – nicknamed Junior Jesus as a result of his charisma and popularity among his
supporters – used a populist discursive style to great effect in some of the most rural parts of the country. Similarly, Tshidiso Maloka (1996) has argued that the concept of populism can be profitably used to illuminate struggles over political power in rural South Africa. The neglect of rural populism in more comparative work overlooks this reality, and has led Africanists away from engaging with two critical questions: how does populism relate to ethnic politics, and is Afro-populism really just ethno-nationalism in disguise?

Inclusive and exclusive populism in Africa

With a small number of important exceptions, African elections witness high levels of ethnic political mobilization. Although recent research has found that a number of others factors shape voting behavior, such as evaluations of the economic performance of the incumbent, most studies conclude that ethnicity is the most powerful explanation of electoral behavior (Eifert, Miguel and Posner 2010; Cheeseman 2015). This is significant, because at first glance ethnic and populist forms of mobilization appear to be incompatible. Appealing to voters on the basis of the need to defend the interests of the “common man” implies a form of solidarity rooted in class or economic status that does not fit well with ethnic politics and its emphasis on sectional divisions. While populism has the potential to be relatively inclusive, with leaders pledging to improve the position of the disenfranchised whatever their ethnic or racial identity (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), the logic of ethnic politics is inherently exclusionary. Indeed, the notion that individuals should vote for a candidate of their ethnicity, who in turn is expected to deliver benefits back to their own community, effectively casts members of other ethnic groups as outsiders and rivals.

The tension between pure populism and ethnic and racial politics is well brought out by Halisi (1997) and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2008) work on South Africa. Featuring one of the highest levels of urbanization on the continent, and having experienced a particularly early and prolonged nationalist movement, it is perhaps to be expected that “South Africa has richer and more deep-rooted populist traditions than any other country in southern Africa” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008: 66). However, despite these traditions, and the promotion of the rainbow nation ideal by Nelson Mandela, Halisi and Ndlovu-Gatsheni conclude that the country lacks a unifying populist movement. One of the main reasons for this is the way in the very different intellectual traditions within the country’s various communities. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes, Halisi’s explanation of this is particularly insightful and so is worth citing at length:

Rival populisms, nourished by competing visions of liberation, are bound to have an impact on the evolution of South African citizenship because popular democratic traditions, of which populism is one manifestation, are among the most durable sources of inspiration for democratic thinkers. After centuries of racial domination, it would be unrealistic to expect an ethos of non-racial citizenship to prevail unchallenged by older political perceptions. Eventually, the black liberation struggle may come to be viewed by all South Africans as a national achievement and, therefore, a cornerstone of non-racial citizenship identity; but for the immediate future, successive governments will have to cope with the sensibilities grounded in both non-racial and race politics.

(1997: 78)

A classic example of this kind of exclusionary politics is the “racial populism” of Julius Malema, who rose to prominence as the leader of the ANC Youth League but then split from
the ruling party after his relationship with ANC leader Jacob Zuma deteriorated. As the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Malema has adopted a number of classic populist tropes, including having the party’s Members of Parliament dress in everyday workers’ overalls rather than smart clothes when they sit in the National Assembly. However, despite aligning himself with the “common man”, Malema’s rhetoric is far from inclusive. Instead, he has presented himself as the only leader willing to stand up to white political and economic power in order to reverse the injustices inherited from apartheid. According to Deborah Posel, “symbolically, Malema entered the public sphere as a counterpoint to Nelson Mandela unsettling the iconography of non-racialism, reasserting an angry and confrontational version of race that reinstated the specter of violent conflagration that Mandela’s ‘miracle’ held at bay” (2013: 32). As a result, the kind of competing populisms described over a decade ago by Halisi and Ndlovu-Gatsheni are very much alive and kicking in the country today.

South Africa is not alone in this respect: exclusionary forms of populism that mix appeals to economic solidarity with messages that invoke race/ethnicity can be found in many countries. This raises the question of how candidates can reconcile these two different types of appeal. Perhaps the most obvious answer to this puzzle, drawing on the South African example, is that “While there is often a tension between the vertical ties of communal identity that support ethnic mobilization and the horizontal ties of solidarity that underpin populist appeals, class and ethnic identities may coincide, removing the barrier to ethnopopulist politics” (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015: 8). In other words, where government discrimination has been so severe that the community that one is born into determines one’s life chances, class and ethnicity may overlap to the extent that they become coterminous. This is certainly the case in countries with a particularly poisonous colonial legacy, such as Burundi and Rwanda (Uvin 1999), and of course South Africa where the apartheid regime instituted a particularly systematic form of economic, social and political subjugation. In such a context, populist and racial/ethnic appeals may both target the same community without contradiction. However, this interpretation does not really account for the success of populist leaders in countries such as Kenya and Zambia, where there is as much inequality within ethnic groups as there is between them.

In order to explain the compatibility of ethnic and populist appeals we therefore need to look elsewhere. A different way to square this circle is to conceptualize African populism as a discursive style with no ideological content. Understood in this way, there is no real clash between populist and ethnic strategies because populism is little more than a rhetorical device that leaders use to rally their supporters around a range of different messages, which can be ethnic, religious, programmatic, nationalist and so on. In other words, one could argue that there is no tension between ethnic politics and populism because populism is simply a way of delivering a message; it is not the message itself. However, this answer is ultimately unsatisfactory because in at least some cases populism has clearly been more than just a discursive style.

To return to the example of Michael Sata, while it was his firebrand performances on the stump that caught the eye of any analysts, “King Cobra” also developed a powerful explanation of the country’s economic woes that rested on the claim that an out of touch government had colluded with Chinese and other foreign “infesters” to betray the interests of the common man (2007: 627–629). Like many populists, Sata suggested that economic salvation was just a short step away, and could be achieved by transferring control of the state back in to the hands of ordinary Zambians, represented by their most loyal of servants – Sata himself. Thus, although Sata’s political platform was at times inconsistent and incoherent, his thinking demonstrates clear evidence of the kind of thin populist ideology described by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013: 5–6).
Moreover, there is good evidence that these policies resonated with a significant portion of Sata’s support base. Research conducted by the author, Robert Ford and Neo Simutani (2014) found that Zambians who held political beliefs and attitudes commonly associated with a leftist populist position – rejection of elites, support for high levels of state intervention – were significantly more likely to support Michael Sata than those did not. By cultivating the appeal of his Patriotic Front (PF) party among these voters, Sata was able to consistently expand his support base across ethnic lines in urban areas. At the same time, he was able to grow his popularity in some rural areas through “ethnic” appeals to the Bemba community with which he identified (Cheeseman and Hinfelaar 2010). Taken together, these two trends enabled Sata to increase his share of the vote from just 3% in 2001 to 42% in 2011, which proved to be sufficient to secure the presidency, unseating a formerly dominant ruling party in the process. In the case of countries such as Zambia, then, we cannot simply dismiss or sidestep the apparent tensions between ethnic and populist political strategies.

A comparative analysis of Zambia and Kenya helps to demonstrate the conditions under which it is feasible for leaders to deploy ethnopopulist strategies. The case of Zambia has already been introduced. The case of Kenya offers a valuable point of comparison because although it has been noted as a country that has suffered particularly violent forms of ethnic politics (Cheeseman 2008), scholars such as Resnick have identified Kenya’s main opposition leader, Raila Odinga, as one of the new generation of effective populist mobilizers. In other words, by bringing Kenya into the analysis we can leverage the impact that a history of pronounced ethnic politics has on the potential for populist politics.

Comparing Odinga’s election campaign in 2007 – which was almost successful, and may have only been defeated by last minute rigging (Cheeseman 2008) – to Sata’s reveals a number of similarities as well as some very significant differences. In both cases, there was a clear tension between the messages leveraged by political leaders in urban and rural areas. To take the most obvious example, in Zambia Michael Sata pledged to reduce the cost of food for urban workers, which implicitly threatened to undermine the revenue received by agricultural producers among in his rural Bemba support base. At the same time, his pledge to promote the interests of the Bemba community implied that members of other ethnic groups might lose out if he secured power. So how was Sata able to rally support across these very different constituencies without his campaign being undermined by the inherent contradictions at the heart of this “ethnopopulist” approach? And to what extent did the greater prevalence of ethnic politics in Kenya prevent Odinga from doing the same?

One possible explanation of Sata’s success is that poor information networks in Africa mean that leaders can say different – and often incompatible – things to different groups without being punished. In other words, ethnic appeals about favoritism and local issues can be targeted at rural voters, while populist appeals can be targeted at urban voters, with neither group being aware of the what is being said to the other. This may be true in some instances, but it doesn’t appear to apply in the Zambian case. Instead, there is strong evidence that Sata was able to appeal to various constituencies at the same time because despite their different economic interests they shared many of the same political beliefs (Cheeseman, Ford and Simutanyi 2014: 358). In other words, Sata did not simply mobilize in a “populist” way in urban areas and an “ethnic” way in rural locales (though there was certainly an element of this); rather, he articulated a set of grievances that resonated with both constituencies.
Although well documented, the Zambian experience is relatively rare in Africa. On the whole, populist appeals have not been so ethnically inclusive, or so effective. The case of Kenya demonstrates this tendency well. In the run up to 2007, Raila Odinga struggled to find a common message to rally his ethnically diverse support base. Forming a “pentagon” of leaders from each part of the country to back his candidacy proved to be an effective way of broadening the reach of his campaign, but in effect Odinga’s candidacy depended on the ability of regional “Big Men” to deliver their communities. In other words, despite his populist rhetoric Odinga attracted a cross-ethnic support base by harnessing diverse ethnic identities, rather than overcoming them. This raises an important question: how can the variations in outcome between Kenya and Zambia described here be explained?

The literature on populism in other parts of the world has already suggested some potential answers to this puzzle. Most notably, Madrid has sought to explain the “rise of ethnopopulism in Latin America” by arguing that ethnically based appeals can be successfully married to populist ones when ethnic identification is not “unidimensional” and ethnic polarization is relatively low (2008: 479). For example, Madrid suggests that the electoral strategy of Evo Morales succeeded because the mobilization of self-identified indigenous peoples did not clash with more class-based appeals to the poor in Bolivia’s multidimensional political space. However, although Madrid’s work is illuminating, such explanations are of little help in Africa where the salience of communal identities is profound and ethnicity is often the overriding political cleavage.

Instead, my research with Miles Larmer suggests that the two main factors that shape the feasibility of successfully adopting an inclusive form of ethnopopulism are “variation in the reach of the urban political economy and the extent to which ethnic identities have historically been politicized” (2015: 22). More specifically, we argue that in order to bridge the likely gap between ethnic and populist constituencies, leaders must be able to “articulate shared narratives of exclusion in order to integrate diverse constituencies into a united campaign”. This is most likely to be possible where urban areas have comparatively high economic and political significance, such that patterns of rural–urban–rural migration and urban–rural remittances bridge the divide between urban and rural voters and increase the willingness of rural communities to support populist parties.

(2015: 23)

The very different fortunes of ethnopopulist leaders in Kenya and Zambia demonstrate this point well. In Zambia, high levels of urbanization and industrialization have underpinned a history of urban radicalism, while President Kenneth Kaunda’s one-party state attempted – though not always successfully – to manage ethnicity out of politics. The cumulative effect of the repeated circulation of people and ideas between urban and rural locations (Macmillan 1993), the centrality of the urban economy to wider developments, and the lower political salience of ethnic cleavages, ensured that populist appeals resonated beyond the cities. On this interpretation, it was the shared interests of rural Bemba and urban voters, who both stood to gain from improvements in the pay and conditions for urban workers as a result of the significance of urban remittances to rural livelihoods, which underpinned their common support for populist positions. As a result, Sata was able to run a more inclusive campaign in which voters from a range of ethnic groups were attracted to his political platform, overcoming – if only for a short time – the country’s ethno-linguistic divisions.
By contrast, in the Kenyan case the high salience of ethnicity and comparatively low level of urbanization limited the reach and efficacy of ethnically neutral populist appeals. Faced with such a context, Odinga had little option but to mobilize support by co-opting regional leaders, which had the side effect of emphasized the importance of ethnically constituted patron-client relations, exacerbating inter-communal tensions. In turn, this contributed to the outbreak of ethnic violence following a particularly heated election campaign, which culminated in the electoral commission announcing a disputed result. In this way, the “fate of the PF and the ODM reveals not only the constraints under which opposition leaders operate, but also the danger posed by forms of ethnopolitism that rely more heavily on ethnic, rather than populist, foundations” (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015: 23).

This finding represents an important challenge to the notion that populism is rife, and effective, in Africa. Such a claim may be true if we confine ourselves to speaking about populism solely as a discursive style, but it is misleading if it is taken to imply the existence of a populist ideology, or the effective deployment of populist strategies of electoral mobilization. Of course, not all African states feature “ethnic politics”, and there are a number of countries that are more ethnically homogenous and in which ethnicity has played a less important role in structuring political competition, such as Botswana and Zimbabwe. However, when it comes to the salience of ethnicity most African states are closer to Kenya than they are to Zambia, and there are few countries in which leaders can hope to win elections on the basis of urban votes alone. As a result, an inclusive populist appeal in urban areas is rarely enough for a leader to secure national power. In turn, this constrains the potential for pure populist strategies to be successful and pushes aspiring candidates toward ethnopolitism.

The future for populism in Africa

If it is true that populism thrives in the context of larger urban populations, and closer ties between rural and urban areas, then the next twenty years are likely to see the rise of an increasing number of leaders in the mold of Michael Sata. According to UN Habitat (2014), Africa is one of the fastest urbanizing areas in the world. By 2035, around 50% of people on the continent will live in urban areas, while the number of urban dwellers on the continent is likely to increase from 400 million to 1.26 billion by 2050 (2014: 9). A recent report by the consultancy group Oxford Analytica (2016) suggests that this is likely to change the political geography of the continent, giving rise to extended metropolitan areas, growing urban corridors, and in some cases urban “mega-regions”. Already the average distance between urban centers with populations of more than 10,000 people in West Africa has decreased from 111 km in 1950 to just 33 km in 2000. Thus, in the future more Africans will be living in urban areas, and the gap between those urban areas, and between them and the rural hinterland, is going to decrease (2016: 1).

This suggests that the kind of high-density urban environments that according to Resnick facilitate populist mobilization are likely to become much more common in the future. Moreover, the influence of urban life on rural areas is likely to increase. As the above discussion of Zambia makes clear, urban culture, economics and politics already has a profound impact on its rural equivalent (Macmillan 1993; Ferguson 1994). This is not only because of the high volume of people that move between urban and rural locales, but the many forms of communication that connect the two. In the future, the strength of this influence is likely to be reinforced from two directions. On the one hand, as rural Africa shrinks and urban Africa expands, the physical distance between urbanites and rural dwellers will fall. On the other, high
mobile phone penetration, and in particular the growing number of smart phones that can share videos, music and news, will further integrate rural and urban information networks. If this process plays out in other African states as it has in Zambia, once consequence of these processes will be that urban political ideas will increasingly resonate outside of urban areas.

Of course, the relationship between urbanization and populism will be mediated by the policies that governments put in place to manage ever expanding urban populations. At present, there are few examples of successful urban planning on the continent (Davis 2007; Kaplan 2014). Although the Lagos State Government has done an impressive job of raising locally generated revenue and using it to provide better services, it is the exception that proves the rule (Cheeseman and de Gramont 2017). Given the limited investment in infrastructure across the continent, current demographic trends are likely to stretch urban administration and government facilities beyond breaking point. While much of the analysis of urbanization has focused on capital cities such as Lagos and Nairobi, around 75% of the urban population increase will be absorbed by small and intermediate sized cities (Oxford Analytica 2016: 1). This means that a considerable portion of the challenge of accommodating new urban residents will be borne by areas that typically lack the finance and human capital to respond. Without urgent action, it is almost certain that the growth of towns and cities will result in the emergence of new slums (UN Habitat 2014: 17–18). Taken together, these developments are likely to encourage marginalized urbanites to listen to populist appeals.

However, as in the past other trends will complicate this story. It is unclear whether the overall political salience of ethnicity is rising or falling on the continent, but recent research has demonstrated the propensity for election campaigns to focus attentions away from overarching sentiments such as class and nationalism and toward narrow sectional interests such as ethnicity (Eifert, Miguel and Posner 2010). Along with continuing tensions between “indigenes” and “settlers” over the local distribution of political rights and economic resources (Geschiere 2009), this suggests that ethnic cleavages are likely to play a major role in the struggle for power for the foreseeable future. Moreover, while urbanization is often said to reduce the prospects for ethnic politics – in large part because factors such as travel, inter-marriage and access to a greater diversity of information have been found to correlate with a more “civic” mindset (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008) – it may also exacerbate ethnic tensions, especially in the short-term. Historical and anthropological research has found that urban migration can bring different ethnic communities into competition over jobs, which may serve to strengthen the salience of ethnic identities (Mitchell 1969). Given this, the chances are that future political leaders will continue to face the challenge of how to reconcile populist and ethnic constituencies. We therefore need to develop a better understanding of the dynamics and possibilities of ethnopopulism in the African context.

It will also be important to investigate the sustainability of populist strategies in those countries in which conditions appear to be favorable, such as Zambia. Although Michael Sata’s opposition won power in 2011 – an impressive achievement in what had been a dominant-party state – the new government subsequently struggled to consolidate its authority. Following Sata’s untimely death in 2014, and his replacement by Edgar Lungu, the PF’s popular appeal has fallen as the government has struggled to live up to its pre-election promises. Reflecting on this decline, Alastair Fraser describes a populist legacy characterized by “hyper-partisanship, violence and authoritarianism”, in which “An optimistic, future-oriented project” to meet popular needs has given way to “popular cynicism and apathy and an insecure, authoritarian ruling party” (2017: 457). If populist theatre cannot be sustained even in more supportive contexts, it may prove to be a star that burns twice as bright precisely because it burns half as long.
Notes

* An earlier and shorter version of this chapter was circulated in the newsletter of the Comparative Politics section of the American Political Science Association in 2016. The author would like to thank Jonathan Fisher and Miles Larmer for helpful comments and suggestions.


2 “Ethnic” is used here as a shorthand for a range of ethnic, linguistic and regional identities that are politically salient in Africa, the precise form of which varies across countries.

3 Sata was a member of the Bisa community, and so not a Bemba, but he spoke Bemba and sought to identify himself with and mobilize through this more numerous ethno-linguistic group.

4 In 2009, citizens from a number of different ethnic communities were found to have no bias against Sata, even when they did not share his background and had the option of backing co-ethnic leaders. The one exception was the Tonga community (Cheeseman, Ford and Simutanyi 2014: 358).

References


