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Africa Research Centre, University of Pécs

POPULIST EXPRESSION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: AN ARCHETYPE ANALYSIS OF NEW GENERATION POPULISTS

NEO SITHOLE

PHD CANDIDATE, DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THE FACULTY OF LAW AND POLITICAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

E-MAIL: NEO.SITHOLE@HOTMAIL.COM

ORCID: 0009-0002-4778-2970

Abstract

With a focus on political leaders from South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya, this study uses a combination of visual analysis and critical discourse analysis to investigate populist repertoires in Africa. In South Africa and Uganda, where political legitimacy is frequently linked to military experience or revolutionary involvement, the results emphasise the dominance of the "patriotic military man" and "militant" repertoires. These leaders maintain their public personas through symbolic actions, such as wearing military uniforms and using revolutionary rhetoric. In contrast, Kenya shows a preference for the "businessman" approach, highlighting success attained through perseverance within the informal economy. A significant portion of the population, facing similar financial challenges, can relate to this approach. The study emphasizes how the appeal and effectiveness of various populist strategies are influenced by Africa's diverse political histories, which reflect the broader sociopolitical dynamics of the region.

Keywords

Populism, African Populism, Populist Leadership, Liberation Politics and Political Legitimacy

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1. Introduction

The year 2024 marked a pivotal moment for democracy, as national elections took place in over seventy countries worldwide. This year was also referred to as the year of right-wing populism, with populist parties making notable gains in several of the world's major democracies, including the European Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This shift to the right forced many countries to confront the rising influence of populism and consider its potential permanence. A significant event for many was "Trump 2.0," a term used to describe the predictable re-election of the individual whose victory in the 2016 presidential election sparked the subsequent waves of populist sentiment and inspired a body of literature exploring various manifestations of populism.

According to an Ipsos survey report spanning 28 countries and 20,630 respondents, there is widespread predisposition to populism and populist leaders. Findings from the report revealed an increase in anti-establishment sentiment, and pessimism around the progress of the respective countries, with an average of 63% believing in the need for a 'strong leader' to reclaim the country from the elites and, on average, 74% wanting to see the emergence of some type of 'activist government' (Young, 2024).

Democracies outside of the West have not been insulated from the fashionableness of populist politics, with many of them unsurprisingly dealing with the steady spread of populist figures like those in South Asia, India, Latin America, and Africa. Scholars offer several interlocking explanations for the populist wave washing over Africa, with some positing it as a backlash against the felt effect of economic failures, lack of social services, widespread corruption, inability to deal with growing crime, racial inequalities, anti-migration, xenophobia, and the distribution of resources such as land (Lockwood, 2023; Kamencu & Josse-Durand, 2023; Mathekga, 2025; Morieson, 2024).

Populism's contemporary flashiness in Africa should not give the impression that it is, by any measure, a recent development in African political life. Populism has been a significant aspect of African politics, particularly during decolonization. In this context, populist leaders and their rhetoric played a crucial role in changing the political landscape. This influence is still evident today in countries like South Africa, where the simultaneous rise of populist parties has contributed to the historic loss of the African National Congress (ANC) parliamentary majority (Morieson, 2024).

Mustvairo & Salgado express that to develop a comprehensive analysis of how populism functions in a specific context, identifying key characteristics in populist strategies and how they mobilize support, instead of simply labelling them as populists, is necessary (2021). Research on populism in the African context has explored a variety of topics. This includes discussions on the continent's populist history (Guy, 2012; Idahosa, 2004; Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017) and electoral instances of populism, focusing on the socio-economic conditions that have contributed to the rise of populist movements (Resnick, 2010; Resnick, 2017; Cheeseman & Kamencu, 2024). Additionally, studies have examined the impacts of populism on local constitutions (Boone, 2009; Louise, 2011).

In further fleshing out our understanding of African populism and the actors spearheading its development, this paper reviews leadership in South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya with the aim of identifying what, if any, commonalities exist in political identities, rhetorical tropes, and modes of behaviour visible across these three contexts. This text analyses populism through an inter-generational approach by categorizing populist leaders into two groups. The first group, known as Old School Populists, includes those who participated in state-level politics at an executive level during the 1990s, a period marked by dependent democratic consolidation in Europe. The second group, called New School Populists, consists of those whose rise to power occurred within the now consolidated democracies, primarily starting in the 2010s.

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The reasoning guiding the study of populist expression across two time periods is guided by the desire to examine the extent to which differences in historical contextual realities alter populist materialization. In achieving its aims, the text utilizes visual and critical discourse analysis as well as clarifying the historical setting to reveal the kinds of narrative, behaviours, and pre-existing populist leadership blueprint used in their populist performance.

It should be said that populists can be found in many forms and at all levels of African society. The focus here is not to say they are limited to political leadership; it is just that most populists are actively involved in politics at a high enough level to be widely considered political leaders.

2. Populism, a (brief) overview

Before delving into the archetypes of African populist leadership, it is important to provide a brief overview of populism. There are numerous interpretations of populism, and each definition is contested, reflecting different conceptual approaches to the subject. These approaches span ideological, strategic, communicative, and socio-cultural dimensions and various formations such as exclusionary, inclusionary, radical, and nativist (Naxera et al., 2023).

The many variations in its conceptual understanding stemming from populism's 'sexiness' have led to populism's conceptual ambiguity, a phrase pointing to the sheer difficulty in determining populism's true identity. The differences in global populist expression worsen this ambiguity. De la Torre mentions the discussions over what populism does or the differentiation of populism across the Left-Right axis and between 'light and full-blown' populism, with the latter seeking to 'rupture

existing institutions' through the polarization of society and polity (de la Torre, 2021). Other explanations frame populism as an inherently harmful and manipulative leadership style that 'perverts the ordinary protocols of democratic process & governance,' damaging the dreams of ordinary citizens and the fabric of society (Attewell, 2020), and ultimately becomes a negative feature of government (Barber, 2019). Viviani (2017) suggests that contemporary populism is a consequence of the perceived democratic deficit left in the wake of widening societal gaps, involves the organizational transformation of parties, and calls into question the legitimacy of representative democracies.

Despite the fractures in the conceptual or functional understandings of populism, there is a general agreement on some facets that comprise populism. Usually these are; the separation/polarization of society into two opposing groups, 'the people' and 'the elite/others,' an opposition to the established political order, and that "all forms of populism include some kind of appeal to supreme will of the "the people" as the guidance for all political action and denunciation of "the elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2017). A second component often present and needed in populist discourse is the anti-establishment claim that populist leaders alone can properly and credibly represent the people, believing themselves to be a part of them (Guth & Nelsen, 2019). In all iterations of populism, the people and 'the others' are vague, empty signifiers whose meanings are intentionally malleable and highly dependent on the context they are used in; these can be political, economic, religious, or ethnic groups. Third is populism, being a "thin-centred" ideology in the ways that it has limited ambition and scope (Mudde 2017, 1-2), being a loose complex of attitudes as opposed to a coherent combination of ideas that comprise a complete (thick) worldview (Sorensen, 2022). In this context, populism, as an ideology or practice, cannot stand on its own but exists parasitically, taking the form of whatever institutional setup it is grafted onto, within the context of the dominant political setup. It can be argued that this is why populism is often studied in conjunction with liberalism and democracy.

This would be a good time to mention that populism's historical popularity with the Right-wing has stained the conceptual neutrality with which populism should be approached. In truth, populism, when looked at neutrally, is considered a built-in failsafe of representative democracies (Canovan, 2002; Mouffe, 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), a corrective feature able to reintroduce the concerns of fringe groups into politics or reinforce the very principle of 'rule by the people' through its necessary reliance on mass support.

It needs to be reiterated that populism, despite the breadth of its application, is not a true ideology, meaning it lacks the theoretical depth that can be witnessed in ideologies like Marxism or Socialism. It is instead a transient ideology often used in combination with other ideologies that would steer the direction of populist growth. Appropriate care must thus be taken with explorations of populism in settings where it has been assessed to be in co-occurrence with other ideologies known to be populist adjacent, such as nationalism or socialism. Africa is one such setting

with populism coinciding with what Alex Thompson (2010) articulates as 'shades of African nationalism.' For Thompson, African populism exists as a variation of African nationalism, the continent's dominating ideological force (Thompson, 2010). Here, populism, sharing the conceptual attributes identified earlier, is concerned with returning political power to the masses and putting the 'ordinary person' (Thompson, 2010) at the forefront. Populist movements, typically in the form of military governments and headed by strong, charismatic leaders (Lehoczki, 2024), had their genesis prompted by the belief that the existing government/regime had become too self-interested and that people should be involved in the political process and the state should be more responsive to their needs (Thompson, 2010). Ghana's Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings and Captain Thomas Sankara in Ghana, who both led respective populist military governments in the 1980s, or modern-day Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traore, are examples of this.

This said, it must be clarified that while normally present in military regimes, populism can and has occurred in more civilian governments, such as that of Guinea-Conakry's Ahmed Sekou Toure. It has also come about in conjunction with other shades of African nationalism like socialism as the cases of the Guinea-Bissau, Mali or Tanzania that Guy (2012) identifies as having the five socialism populist elements; (1) radical nationalism; (2) a radical mood; (3) anti-capitalism; (4) populism and an exaltation of the peasantry; and (5) adherence to a moderate form of socialism (or social democracy) and a rejection of orthodox Marxism.

3. Populist Leadership Styles

A synthesised consensus on the populist leadership styles finds that they draw on being direct and decisive while relying on agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, stereotypes, recourse to common sense arguments, and inducing fear by using extreme emotions.

Makulio (2013) describes 'exhaustive' indicators of typical populist leaders as:

> (i) Strong personalistic leadership; (ii) claims that the new leader is from 'outside' of the existing political class; (iii) a stance that is 'anti' current institutions/system/organizations frequently coupled with the targeting of political parties/corruption; (iv) vows to restore 'power to the people thus re-founding democracy; (v) mass mobilization strategy aimed at legitimation and implementation of the above points.

Before proceeding, it would be prudent to address the potential confusion between populist leadership styles and popular or charismatic leadership styles. A fair starting point is to highlight that charisma often plays a central role in populism. While it is significant for gaining popularity, it is not always a necessary component. For instance, Uganda's first president after the transition to independence, Milton Obote, lacked charisma and widespread appeal; yet, historians still classify him as a populist, primarily due to his government's programs (Mittelman, 1975; Saul, 1967).

While populist leaders tend to be charismatic, not all charismatic leaders can be classified as populists. Charismatic leaders, as described by Weber (in Wang et al., 2005), possess qualities that are often seen as mystical, personally magnetic, and potentially narcissistic. These leaders typically have extraordinary personality traits, a remarkable ability to inspire, and the capacity to connect with emotional and ideological values in their communication. Furthermore, they usually present a solution-oriented vision (Yukl, 2010; House & Howell, 1992). However, there is no direct correlation that guarantees all charismatic leaders are populist in nature. Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama are illustrative of this. Conversely, popular leadership, supported by the public, exhibits traits evident in analyses of popular leadership, according to Hangemann (2022). These traits include seeing opportunities instead of problems, effectiveness in implementation, and a people-oriented approach. Notably, while popular, charismatic, and populist leadership styles have been theorized as distinct from each other, they often share traits when manifested.

Taggart (2000:169) states that populism's propensity for charismatic leadership is proof of its preference for strong leadership. As for the specifics about when a populist can be considered populist, Pappas affirms that a leader is populist when (1) they participate in competitive elections (2) holds allegiance to the rules and procedures of parliamentary democracy; (3) posits that society is split along one, and only one line, ostensibly dividing "the people" from some elite "establishment;" (4) promotes political polarization at the expense of moderation, compromise, and consensus; and (5) exalts majoritarianism at the expense of the rule of law and the protection of minority rights (2020:231).

In an attempt to carve out specific kinds of leadership styles, Casullo (2019) suggests that 'charisma' could be the ability of leaders to read social repertoires and weave together their personal life with the collective social life. Repertoires here are socially shared discursive templates that inform or legitimate the accepted behaviours of populist actors, which inform aspects like how they dress, speak, or what kind of 'life-stories' are better suited for political usage.[1] Mudde and Kalwasser (2017) offer additional repertoires (although not called repertoires), these being the charismatic strongman, the economic entrepreneur, and ethnic leaders; however, for this paper, only those that Casullo offers are focused on.

To this effort, Casullo outlines four kinds of repertoires of populist leaders, these being the patriotic soldier, the social leader, the successful businessman, and the strong woman.[2]

When discussing populist templates, it is important to note that, although they can be effective political strategies, they also carry "considerable risks," as highlighted by Weyland (2022: 17). Stemming from the inherent nature of the personalistic plebiscitary leadership style often employed by populists, some of these risks include:

> The pre-eminence of a supremely confident leader entails frequent mistakes and misdeeds, which undermine performance and erode mass backing, the populists' principal asset. (2) Overbearing personalistic leaders have difficulty building

The Patriotic Military Man:	The Social Leader:
Making use of their past in the military to catapult into political life Narrative of someone previously satisfied with political life as a member of the military, but after facing the moral deterioration of their country, entered politics from a sense of patriotic duty Examples: Gamal Nasser (Egypt), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Omar Torrijos (Panama)	Someone elected/trying to be elected through being politically active in a social movement (especially if this movement includes protests of any kind) The appeal comes from societies' favourable predisposition towards them as economic and/or social crises created by the state discredited centrist/mainstream parties.
The Successful Businessman:	**The Strong Woman:**
Closely related to Heinisch & Saxonberg electoral populism, in which "political formations competing for public office that are led by charismatic business leaders, who claim that their ability to run businesses successfully means they will be able to run government well." The country is seen as a company that needs to be taught how to compete within the global market of nations	Embody the tough mother trope Underscore their femininity/motherhood as a vital part of their strength and resilience, presenting themselves as mothers of the nations, predisposed to protect family and community; however, they must not be too tough at the risk of losing appeal. Female populists combine traits traditionally masculine, like toughness or strength, with traditionally feminine attributes like empathy, maternalism, or caring

Table 1. Casullo, 2019: 58-66.

firm support among important political actors and provoke dangerous, if not lethal, counterattacks from establishment forces. (3) Hampered by these weaknesses, many populist chief executives run into institutional checks and balances and external constraints.

4. African Populism, Populist Leadership, and Contributing Political Landscape

Africa has a rich heritage of leadership and leadership profiles rooted in African culture. While this heritage is unique, it is not uniform, shifting in form from era to era and from location to location, as well as from African to African (Ngujiri, 2023). Many references are made to Indigenous philosophies, such as Ubuntu, to provide ideological substance to African leadership. This is often done to explain the relevance of traditional cultural beliefs in contemporary 'Westernized' leadership roles or to question their value as a foundation for African political leadership (Metz, 2018; Mthuli et al., 2023; Asiimwe, 2023). A chronological overview of African leaders includes pre-liberation leaders, those who led military regimes or coups outside the generation of liberation leaders, and leaders associated with the wave of democratization. The fourth wave addresses leadership crises that have contributed to state failure, state collapse, and political corruption or neo-patrimonialism, followed by the emergence of a 'new generation of leaders' (Swart et al., 2014).

In initiating the dialogue around populist templates in Africa, it may be healthy to highlight the ties between populism and African leadership. A start could be raising the question that African leadership studies face, a similar question posed in African populist studies: what makes African leadership 'African'? A fitting answer comes from Faith Wambura Ngunjiri who writes that "African leadership is African in as much as it is enacted in Africa, by Africans, influenced by the conditions and concerns that prevail in their specific African contexts" (2023:3). Repurposing this to fit the geo-political concern of this paper, one could say that beyond it being displayed by Africans; African populism finds 'Africanness' in it drawing from specific contexts found in Africa.

Perhaps more so than other parts of the world, historical contexts can be seen at the core of some of the prevalent populist templates in Africa, with many populists finding unison in their 'unwavering anti-colonial rhetoric,' which is often presented as a message of hope (Mustvairo & Salgado, 2021) towards the masses populists aim to court. This rhetoric takes root with the first generation of African populists, who used populism to rally oppressed Africans against colonial regimes. William Friedland points to this when recounting populism's use in Tanganyika, "They called on the masses of the people and the people responded" (Friedland 1964, 21).

The decolonization and early independence period is one of the most well-known examples of political competition in the continent's anti-colonial struggle and efforts to resist African colonizers and overthrow autocratic regimes (van Wyk, 2007). During this time, participants in liberation movements or those who staged coups were able to gain what is referred to as "struggle credentials." This socio-political currency was based on an individual's recognition for their contributions to liberation or revolutionary efforts, which granted them significant legitimacy and access to power and resources.

When shifting focus to contemporary African populism, Melber (2018) draws attention to it being retrospectively applied as a legitimization tactic by former liberation movements appealing to the continued struggle against foreign domination by colonial proxies left behind but attempting to reclaim power and in doing so, presenting themselves as the only genuine alternative for a promised better future, using Southern Africa as an example. Moreover, the new anti-colonial rhetoric in their discourse promises a land of post-colonial glory, where natives have equal access to jobs and other opportunities, and issues like racial tensions are nonexistent (Mustvairo & Salgado, 2021). This message resonates with the masses, many of whom have directly experienced colonial governance or are affected by the long-standing consequences of colonial administrations, even in cases where rhetoric presents apparent contradictions. Such cases include individuals who would have, or in actuality have, privately benefited from the same system they claim to staunchly oppose (Mustvairo & Salgado, 2021). Policy-wise, African populists often sit on the Left, generally espousing socialist policy points; however, some hold conservative beliefs, with many espousing a mix of state-led capitalism, neo-liberalism, and socialism (Gumede, 2016, Democracy Works Foundation).

Contemporary African politics features several notable elements that likely contribute to the populist performances observed across the continent. These include personality-driven politics, leadership dynamics, and patriarchal systems, as well as the pervasive influence of "Big-Man" politics, often referred to as "Big-Man Syndrome." According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997, cited in Dulani & Tengatenga, 2019), "Big-Man Syndrome" occurs when an individual who dominates the state apparatus is ascribed power personally, rather than through the office they hold, even when a written constitution exists. Proponents of the "Big-Man" model frequently link high political positions to traditional African customs, highlighting the importance of prominent figures and the respect accorded to elders in society. An interesting finding explaining the levels of "Big Man" rule in contemporary politics from Dulani & Tengatenga (2019) is that the relationship between public acceptance of personalized leadership and levels of support for democracy corresponds, meaning countries with lower levels of democratic support conversely display higher levels of support towards "Big-Man" rule.

Having considered the numerous factors influencing the relationships between populist leadership, charisma, and the repertoires that populists can access, the paper is now able to address the crux of the concern, which is scrutinizing the kinds of leadership templates present in African politics between old-school and new-school populists. To do so, the political performance of select leaders from Uganda, South Africa, and Kenya is examined.

5. Old School Populists (1990s): Patriotic Military& Militant Template in Africa

The most well-known template observed in African populists is that of the patriotic military man. This template was once a staple of Latin American populism. However, military forces no longer hold the same symbolic privilege they did, likely due to the image of the armed forces being stained by the human rights violations and other crimes committed by military dictatorships of the 1970s, causing them to fall out of favour.

This is not *particularly* so in Africa, despite the continent having a fair share of troubles dealt by the hands of military men in power, and in some cases, it remains a popular and easily received repertoire. Earlier examples of old-school populists who relied on this template, in combination with their 'struggle credentials' as a means of political legitimation, include Uganda's Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, or South Africa's Jacob Zuma. However, this section will focus on the Ugandan and South African cases.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni came to power in 1986 after a coup led by his National Resistance Army (NRA), which is now known as the National Resistance Movement (NRM). This followed a civil war that same year, making him one of Africa's longest-serving leaders and the longest-standing populist leader. Museveni is a notable example of a "Big Man" operating within a patrimonial state, as described by Harris et al. (2022) and Inam (2018). On his official website, yowerimusiveni.com, he characterizes himself as "a man of strong conviction and rare

courage," a sentiment echoed in the NRM's manifesto for 2021-2026. Khadiagala (1998) highlights Museveni's messianic zeal in his review of Museveni's 1997 book, *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda*. In this book, the NRM is presented as a movement dedicated to planting the "seeds" for a new Uganda – one marked by national unity and free from the selfishness and corruption that plagued the country at that time. This book was authored by Yoweri Museveni himself.

Although the country's most recent (and longest serving) leader, Museveni, is not Uganda's first instance of a military man populist. General Idi Amin, also known as 'Dada', replaced Obote in power using the typical transition methods that characterized Uganda between the 1960s and 1980s. He is recognized as the country's first military populist leader, embodying several traits associated with the populist persona.[3] Amin was dynamic, captivating, extroverted, and jovial. Amin was relayed as being "the common man personified...obvious impatience with the customary formalities of his office, his jocular manner of addressing crowds, and his very willingness to meet the people enamoured him with the ordinary people of Uganda" (Ravenhill 1974, 230). Between 1971-1972 Amin undertook policies "aimed at returning al the means and sectors of production to Ugandan citizens", the crux of his populist Economic War aimed at Africanizating of the economy (Rubungoya 2007, 49). One of the hallmarks of Amin's policies was the ordering not only of the repossession and redistribution of Asian owned properties and business to Uganda, but also the expulsion of 40,000 to 50,000 Asians, some of which

Image 1: Yoweri Museveni in military attire at the 2017 national budget reading.[4]

were Ugandan citizens, a move that at the time was popular with Ugandans both at home and the diaspora (Twaddle, 1973; Gitelson, 1977). Museveni often emphasizes his connection to the local population by using local proverbs and short phrases in vernacular languages. His use of imagery and metaphors that resonate with people's everyday lives aims to appeal to them. However, this approach can lead to overly simplistic, unsustainable, or inapplicable solutions to the state's issues (Carbone, 2005). In several speeches, including the 2024 End of Year Address in Rwakitura, the 7th Presidential Address in Nakasero, and his 2021 Inaugural Speech, Museveni also references his experiences during the country's liberation.

As will be seen with other populists who use the patriotic military man template, Museveni's allusion to his identity as a militant revolutionary goes beyond speech; it is unmistakable in his wearing of military fatigues at civilian events like the commissioning of dams, addressing university students, funerals, or even weddings, regardless of his official retirement from the army in 1995. Displayed in Image 1, in 2017, Museveni attended Uganda's national budget meeting in his military attire. Commenting on it, a member of an opposition party, Padyere, said Museveni's wearing it 'reminds the country of the history, taking us back to 1986' (Kaaya, The Observer, 2017). Then, in 2018, during an engagement with senior military officers from East Africa, Museveni, who was known for his military background, was present, giving a lecture to the officers while fully dressed in his military attire (Image 2). On a separate occasion, Dr. Kizza Besigye, former president of the Forum for Democratic Change retorted that Museveni's use of military garb is to show citizens

Image 2: Museveni alongside a regional Senior Army Official.[5]

'where the power lies' (The East Africa, 2013), suggesting that Museveni's military persona is brought out whenever faced with a difficulty, like dissent or in order to appear more threatening or intimidating.

There are instances where Museveni's military mode is activated when he directly tied himself to the military (more accurately, his revolutionary militia) and the development of Uganda. While attending an induction ceremony at Kabamba Military Academy, Museveni said, "This country is where it is because of this uniform. It's a uniform of honour and that's why I don't [take it off even as] an old man. Even when they are going to bury me, they should bury me in my uniform" (The Monitor, 2011, brackets added). On this same occasion, he commended the NRA, now the Uganda People's Defence Force, for achieving peace and stability.

As discernible from the above, it is not difficult to assert that, even with the highest civilian office in Uganda, Yoweri Museveni's use of the patriotic military persona is an obvious aspect of his populist image. If further illustration is needed, it can be found in images of him participating in a shooting range exercise during a leadership retreat in 2016 (Image 3). This is not typical for heads of state, although it is relatively common in the United States, where it has practically become a tradition for state leaders to engage in some form of recreational shooting activity. The major difference lies in their image; U.S. leaders often dress casually, opting for jeans or shooting range coats (Image 4). In contrast, Museveni participated in such activities while clad in his signature military regalia, complete with a customized hat to

Image 3: Yoweri Museveni exhibiting his "expertise, tactics and skills" at a shooting range in Kyankwanzi, Uganda, in the attire worn during Uganda's Bush War.[6]

Image 4: Former United States President Barack Obama firing a shotgun at clay pigeons at Camp David.[7]

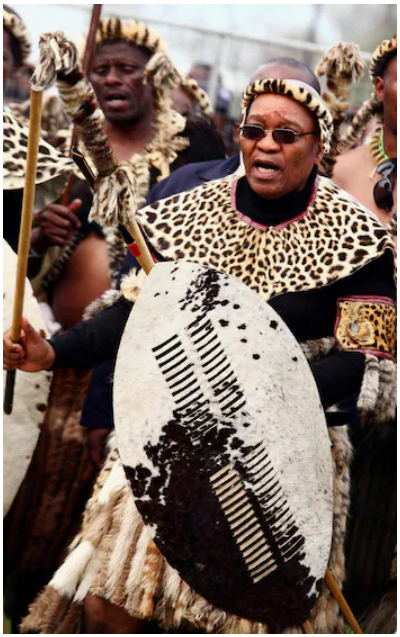

Image 5: Former South African President Jacob Zuma wearing traditional Zulu Warrior attire, complete with shield and weaponry.[8]

protect against mosquito bites. Conventional military forces no longer use this style, but bush guerrillas traditionally favor it. Being a man of the bush, Museveni is well aware of the dangers that come with it, including the need for appropriate attire to guard against insect bites, as he mentioned in a speech during the 2017 annual budget reading.

A second 'old school' populist whose rhetoric evokes characteristics of the patriotic military man is Jacob Zuma, one of South Africa's more prominent political figures, who has had a large hand in shaping the country's contemporary political environment.

A central theme in Zuma's rhetoric is his use of populist tropes, such as presenting himself as an ordinary man and emphasizing his humble background. He often highlights his lack of formal education to distinguish himself from other political elites who have enjoyed access to higher education. This connection resonates with many impoverished individuals who lack access to education, leading them to view him as one of their own (Makulilo, 2013). Zuma's populist image is further reinforced by his traditionalist approach; he often wears traditional clothing such as leopard skins at significant national events, performs traditional songs and dances, and embraces polygamy (Image 5). This approach helps him relate to his large support base among the Zulu people (Makulilo, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Tolsi, 2009). Consequently, he has also been labelled a tribalist (Masuku & Mlambo, 2023). Interestingly, Zuma's strong ethnic identity has not diminished his popularity, likely due to his ability to effectively connect personal and political aspects of his identity (Hunter, 2011).

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Similar to Museveni, Zuma's populist template relies on the politics of memory, making good on the political capital and legitimacy of his pivotal role in the struggle against the Apartheid regime. In line with the patriotic militant, Zuma employs struggle songs as a means of identification. Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes that Zuma's most popular hit from the liberation period is Lethu Mshini Wam' (Bring Me My Machine Gun) to imply a second liberation and attract the poor and marginalized (2008).[9] Critically, he connected to the masses, who felt a sense of betrayal at the failures of the black bourgeoisie, which came into power in 1994, for not meeting the popular demand of the people. The irony that many will point out is that Zuma was one of the black bourgeoisie who entered government; he also held high positions in both the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African government,

Image 6: Official logo of the uMkhonto weSizwe political party

serving as deputy president of the Republic from 1999 to 2005, years before the debut of his populist tactics.

Zuma's identification with South Africa's liberation past continues to shape his political identity, even after leaving the ANC and launching the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), named after the long-disbanded armed wing of the ANC. The party's logo is often associated with traditional Zulu warriors (Image 6). The MKP manifesto is connected by a consistent theme of opposing "neo-apartheid," frequently referencing the impacts of apartheid and emphasizing the need to eliminate all remnants of colonialism and apartheid from cultural and political life. In doing so, it creates the image of a post-liberation movement.

While Zuma's populist style acknowledges his credentials as a revolutionary, a significant difference between him and Museveni is the extent to which he openly embraces his identity as a guerrilla fighter.

6. New School Populists (2010s): Patriotic Militant, Social Leader, and Successful Businessman Templates in Africa

For many on the African continent, 2010 was a monumental year, as it was the first time the FIFA World Cup was hosted in an African state, South Africa. For this paper, however, it acts as a chronological marker separating the Old School from the New School populists. The populists outlined in the subsequent sections came to power in states that had successfully transitioned from colonial regimes or were crippled by civil war, to become stable and (relatively) functional democracies that faced new challenges.

Having seen how the patriotic military man is a relatively central ingredient in the 'old school' populists' stew, we can shift attention to reviewing cases of its use with the new school populists. A significant point is that the minimum requirement for post-liberation leaders to access the patriotic military man repertoire was (relatively) serious participation in liberation efforts. That said, participation in liberation efforts is not the defining feature of the military man template in Africa, nor is it a necessity to benefit from the potency of this template. This will be made apparent when looking at two new school populists who have modified the patriotic military man template to become that of the revolutionary.

Two examples of new school revolutionary populists are South Africa's firebrand politician Julius Malema and Uganda's musician-turned-political opponent Robert Kyagulanyi, more popularly known by the stage name Bobi Wine.

Julius Malema's ideology is rooted in economic socialism, advocating for nationalization and land redistribution through his party, the far-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). His combative rhetoric resonates with his supporters, especially the youth (Mustvairo & Salgado, 2021). Malema often uses metaphors to portray himself as a combatant and a freedom fighter. His revolutionary persona is encapsulated in the slogan "economic freedom in our lifetime." He argues that while political freedom has been achieved in South Africa, there has been no significant change in economic ownership or the racial power dynamics established by British colonialism and perpetuated by the Apartheid regime.

After his expulsion from the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), Malema said, "I'm not a soldier who is prepared to fall in battle…" according to the BBC (2012), explaining his refusal to be pushed out of political life. Speaking at the third National People's Assembly Congress, Malema credited his late grandmother for 'making him a soldier and as a result him becoming a soldier for the people' (Africa Web TV, 2024).

Bobi Wine, leader of the National Unity Platform (Jennings, 2019), presents himself in a similar light. Friesinger (2021) shows that the main thrust of Wine's militance is the dismantling of the lawlessness, corruption, and dictatorship perceived under the Museveni government. In a video analysis of Wine's campaign events, music videos, and speeches, Osterlow (2022) lays out that the recurring elements in Wine's populist performance are those of the 'freedom fighter.'[10] Wine frequently relates the continent's anti-colonial struggle against Western or White oppression to his political activism, using images of Patrice Lumumba or citing Nelson Mandela.

Wine can be argued to be equally a product of the social leader repertoire. In contrast, Malema's support undoubtedly stems from his time in the ANCYL and the EFFs. Wine's popularity came through his career as an activist artist, producing protest music critical of Museveni's government, advocating for social justice amidst the broader call for a generation power transfer in a state where an estimated 80% of the population is under 30 years old (Africa Research Bulletin, 2019; Osiebe, 2020; Melchiorre, 2023) that struck a chord with youth in Uganda and the rest of East Africa. A general subject of repression under the Ugandan state, 120 of Wine's concerts, many of which doubled as rallies, were broken up by the security forces.

A draft bill that would restrict the movements and content of Ugandan artists and filmmakers, also called the "anti-Bobi Wine law," stands as evidence of the extent to which Museveni's government would go in containing Wine (Jennings, 2019; Osiebe, 2020). Two years after his successful introduction into politics, he had been granted the moniker of 'Ghetto President' (Osiebe, 2020), a testament of immense support mainly from among Uganda's youth and urban poor.

Both Wine and Malema symbolize revolutionary characters and freedom fighters by wearing red berets, which connect them to the symbolic legacy of traditional militants like Che Guevara and Thomas Sankara (Wilkins et al., 2021; Braun, 2024; Osterlow, 2022) (Images 7 and 8).[11] In addition to his military-style red uniform, the beret is particularly significant for Wine. Although official military attire, including the beret, is designated as off-limits to the public, Wine has made it a signature element of his militant identity, referring to it as a "symbol of resistance" (Al Jazeera News, 2019). Wine also has worn a bulletproof vest and helmet after experiencing violent attacks due to his political activism (People Power TV, 2020, in Osterlow, 2022). The emulation of militant forces has extended to the supporters of various populist leaders, with some factions of these parties adopting the characteristics of civilian militias. The foot soldiers of the National Unity Platform (NUP) mimic a military structure; they have members who hold ranks and wear military-style uniforms, as shown in Image 9. Additionally, they salute their leader, Bobi Wine, whenever he arrives at events and act as security personnel when he travels to venues with large crowds.

Image 7: Bobi Wine at a rally of his People Power Party in a Red Berret.[12]

In campaign speeches, Wine urged his supporters to "join him in the mission for freedom" (People Power TV, 2020, in Osterlow, 2022). Wine's campaign song "Freedom" builds into the repertoire, with lyrics like "we are fighting for freedom." Malema, too, makes use of music when singing struggle songs during political rallies or gatherings, a common political practice in the region, even more so among Leftist parties directly formed from, or inspired by, liberation movements. One recent example occurred during the EFF's 10th anniversary political rally held in 2023. At the event, Julius Malema jogged on stage, mimicking the training jog performed by the military, and sang "Kill the Boer," a political chant that reflects the armed struggle against apartheid led by the Boers in South Africa. This chant is currently used not only to honour the country's militant history but also for political mobilization. Thousands of attendees joined in, pointing their fingers in the air to imitate guns (New York Times, 2023; South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).[13]

It is clear that, unlike the traditional patriotic military man, the repertoire of the revolutionary has little to no need for any liberation experience. Rather, its operationalization is made possible through identification with a freedom fighter's ideology, language, and symbolism. In this way, they take advantage of the fertile historical context that props up the political legitimacy of the patriotic military man.

7. Businessman Template in Africa

Unlike those closely tied to their country's militant liberation efforts, or those inspired by the militant ideals, there are other notable populists like Tanzania's

Image 8: Julius Malema in a beret at an Economic Freedom Fighters rally.[14]

Jakaya Kikwete or Zambia's Frederick Chiluba whose entrance into politics came from more civil activities, like being a party member of Chama cha Mapinduzi (literally translated as Party of the Revolution), or, as a member of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, respectively. As such, there are other functional repertoires that do not rely on the persona of a militant but rather find their foundation in the legitimacy gained from excelling in civilian activities, such as business and commerce.

Here, we look at the persona exhibited by Kenya's President William Ruto, a successful rags-to-riches businessman, with a 'massive empire' across a number of sectors, key among these being hospitality, real estate, agriculture, and insurance (Business Today, 2022; NTV Kenya, 2020). Ruto's 'hustler populism' is a twist on the successful businessman trope, where a populist is supported by the reasoning that their successful business acumen translates to their being able to run the government.

Ruto's populism aligns with a businessman populist typology that effectively employs an underdog narrative in two main ways. Firstly, he positions himself as an outsider challenging established political dynasties, particularly the Odinga and Kenyatta families, who have dominated Kenyan politics since the country gained independence in 1963. Secondly, he embraces the identity of a "Hustler," claiming to have worked his way up to two of the highest political offices in Kenya. He often refers to himself as the "Hustler in Chief," a title he explained during a 2023 interview with CNN correspondent Larry Madowo. Ruto describes his journey as one of resilience, stating that he has come "very far in life" from selling chickens on the roadside to achieving a prominent position in Kenyan socio-political life.

Image 9: Members of Uganda's National Unity Platform, led by Wine, in their 'uniform'.[15]

Ruto's economic populism shifts politics away from the ethnic-regional lines that have typified Kenyan politics and centers around 'Hustlers', represented by people who, similar to Ruto, did not come from wealthy or well-connected families (Peter, 2023). Instead, these are people who, in the context of Kenya, refer mainly to youth struggling to survive the harsh economic environment. According to the excerpt below from Lockwood (2023), it can be inferred that anyone eager to earn their rations by engaging in various income-generating activities (Karanja, 2022; Kamenuc & Josse-Durand, 2023; Dahir, 2022).

'It is going to be about the hustlers – the ordinary people! It is going to be about enterprise – the wheelbarrow conversation. It is going to be about jobs, for ordinary people'- then Deputy President William Ruto, during a campaign delivered in Dagoretti, Nairobi, Kenya (Lockwood, 2023).

In 2020, Ruto defended his humble beginnings while speaking in Nyamira County, Kenya, saying, "Some people are telling us sons of hustlers cannot be president. That your father must be known. That he must be rich for you to become the president. We are telling them that even a child of a boda boda (motorcycle taxi driver) or a kiosk operator or *mtoto wa anayevuta mkokoteni* (child of a cart pusher) can lead this country" (Kahura & Akech, 2020).

Critically, Ruto's usage of the businessman blueprint is noticeable in his localization of what the common Kenyan businessperson likes and highlighting the kind of business they do, fully embracing the image of the small-time business owner beyond simple rhetoric. In 2018, Ruto launched a chicken auction exercise in Uasin Gishu, his home county, where he personally participated in chasing and catching live chickens, emphasizing his hustler roots (Nairobi News, 2018; Citizen TV Kenya, 2018).

Although Ruto's business success has been attributed to his earlier involvement in political office, the story of his journey from hawker to successful businessman resonated with many Kenyans. Like Ruto, they are part of the country's informal economy, often referred to as "Hustlers," who strive to stay fed and clothed.

8. Differences in Political History

Whilst the essentiality of the continent's history in enabling populist repertoires has been mentioned, it is also healthy to highlight why the differing regional histories influence the general sway of the alternative repertoires.

Almost all states within Sub-Saharan Africa share similar histories concerning their colonization, liberation, and eventual stumbling into independence without preparation for what a nation should look like (Opongo, 2022) or how to build one effectively. The point of divergence that seems responsible for the evolution of local political contexts and the kinds of political performances that exist within them is the type of parties that filled the post-colonial political vacuum.

Parties such as the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) were established three years prior to Kenya's independence in 1963. These parties played a crucial role in providing a platform for political expression and in negotiating the country's political transition (Asingo, 2003;

Anderson, 2003). They were instrumental in shaping Kenya's political landscape and the identities within it. It is important to note that KADU and KANU are classified as independence parties rather than liberation movements. Unlike liberation movements that transformed into political parties to emphasize their direct opposition to colonial or oppressive regimes – often through armed struggle – independence parties were focused on guiding the transitional process to independence. Moreover, the leaders of these independence parties sought to establish party identities that distanced themselves from militant actions, aiming to cultivate an image that was not associated with the perceived atrocities committed by freedom fighters.

In Kenya's foundational politics, the leading figures contrast sharply with those in South Africa and Uganda, where the ANC and NRA, now known as NRM, played significant roles. In South Africa and Uganda, the post-liberation leaders emerged from their opposition to existing regimes, which was expressed through various forms of resistance, including guerrilla warfare, along with their active political formations. The ideological and political identities of these individuals significantly shaped the post-independence identities of their respective parties, ultimately influencing the political cultures that these parties would develop in their respective countries.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite its conceptual ambiguity, there is widespread agreement on several key features of populism. These include the polarization of society into two opposing groups – the people and the elite – an opposition to the established political order, and an appeal to the collective will of the people as the foundation for any political action. Additionally, populist leaders often claim their legitimacy stems from representing this will and seek to galvanize it as a primary component of their political agenda. Studies on populist leadership illustrate this by highlighting qualities such as strong leadership, a willingness to oppose the existing political system, and a commitment to restoring political power to the people. These leaders often emerge as consolidators of the collective will, with certain traits, like charisma, playing a crucial role in their success, alongside attributes such as strength and effective communication.

Charisma, in the context of populism and leadership, is described as a social relationship between leaders and followers where the former is often approached in terms of extraordinariness, exceptionality, and being separate from traditional authority. The latter is responsible for recognizing the former's extraordinariness. However, as seen in Casullo (2019), charisma in populist leadership can also be conceived as the particular ability of a leader to read historically and context-informed discursive templates or 'repertoires,' and use them in their own populist manner. The four kinds of repertoires outlined are the patriotic soldier, the social leader, the successful businessman, and the strong woman.

This paper evaluates the use of populist repertoires in Africa through a blended approach that combines visual analysis and critical discourse analysis. It focuses

on the prominent themes in the populist strategies employed by politicians across different political eras in South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya. One of the most recognizable populist repertoires is that of the patriotic military figure or militant, particularly evident in Uganda and South Africa. A key aspect of this repertoire is the individual's time spent in the military or, in the case of many African populists, their active participation in armed revolutionary movements, which serves to assert their political legitimacy. Typically, those who embody the military persona in their populist repertoire reinforce this image through songs or specific clothing styles. While the militant repertoire does incorporate elements of the military figure, such as songs and military attire, it primarily distinguishes itself through a deeper ideological connection to the ethos of a revolutionary soldier, despite the absence of direct involvement in armed struggles. This repertoire often calls for a new kind of liberation from the tyranny of current post-colonial governments. Supplementary to the military man template is that of a social leader, whose legitimacy stems from their activism and successful leading of social movements.

Differences in the political history of various regions in Africa have led to distinct interests concerning the kinds of political strategies that are effective. For example, in Kenya, the political repertoire is shaped by businessman figures rather than military-aligned leaders. This businessman archetype emphasizes legitimacy derived from genuine civilian activities. Notably, these businesspeople can be seen as hustlers, as their success is often built on years of hard work in the informal economy. This approach resonates strongly with a significant portion of the population who depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods.

Notes

1 While repertoires are socially generated, they are fixed, depending on the social context for definition- of a white male, middle-class lawyer possessing an a-priori advantage of fitting into an existing repertoire informing what 'regular' politicians appear as. However, if social context shifts, then certain repertoires then become disadvantageous (Casullo, 2019)

2 The inclusion of the Strong Woman is for the purpose of outlining the different repertoires theorized by Casullo however this paper addresses only the Patriotic Military Man, Social Leader and Successful Businessman.

3 Amin added the self-designation of 'Dada', meaning grandfather (Ravenhill,1974), thereby endowing himself with the conventional wisdom, respect and authority traditionally held by elders in African society, whether this was intentional is not known. He also believed himself to be machomingi, which means omniscient (Legum, 1997: 254, italics original)

4 Source: All Africa News. https://allafrica.com/stories/201706090622.html

5 Chime Reports News (2018). Museveni Meets Senior East African Army Officers https://chimpreports.com/museveni-meets-senior-east-african-army-officers.

6 Yoweri Museveni Website, https://www.yowerikmuseveni.com/president-shows-target-skills-kyankwanzi-explains-importance-being-steady-and-calm

7 New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/obamas-skeet-shooting-comments-draw-fire.html

8 The Telegraph https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/06/zulu-king-tells-zuma-to-stand-aside-and-let-him-rule-south-afric

9 For Video of singing 'Umshini Wam' please visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFIobjP3xAI.
10 The other two are "a leader who united Ugandans" and a "young politician from a new generation" (Osterlow, 2022
11 In fairness berets have long been familiar garment for South Africa's political expression for those among the country's revolutionary left.
12 Al Jazeera News https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/30/uganda-bans-red-beret-bobi-wines-signature-headgear
13 For visual of this event visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFY8SqyMKq8, exact time for clip is between 0:28-0:55.
14 Malema, the radical politician in Trump's South Africa video Arab News, May 2025 https://www.arabnews.com/node/2601763/world
15 Uganda: Bobi Wine foot soldiers, a symbol of pride, defiance https://www.theafricareport.com/363788/uganda-bobi-wine-foot-soldiers-a-symbol-of-pride-defiance

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