POPULIST PARTIES AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRATIC CHANGE: COMPARING UGANDA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Neo Sithole
PhD candidate
Department of Political Science, University of Szeged
ORCID 0009-0002-4778-2970

Doi:
10.15170/PSK.2026.07.01.03
Received: November 14, 2025
Accepted: February 20, 2026
Published: April 24, 2026

Citation:
Sithole, Neo (2026): Populist Parties as Agents of Democratic Change: Comparing Uganda and South Africa. *Polarities,* 7(1), 33-51.

Acknowledgements:
–

Abstract

The following paper investigates the dual capacity of populist parties to function as either forces of institutionalization or pluralization in democratic trajectories by looking at two opposing cases: the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa. The comparative logic of this paper is grounded in the different designs of the party systems, Uganda and South Africa represent divergent regime types (hybrid authoritarian vs liberal democracy), but share histories of liberation struggle and dominant party systems. This temporal and systemic variation provides analytic leverage to examine populism's contextual effects. The primary conclusion is that populism's impact on African democracy is an arguably progressive one in so far as party systems are concerned. Although it had long-term authoritarian inclinations, the NRM's early populism in Uganda steered the institutionalization of political participation and oversaw the transition toward multi-party politics. On the other hand, despite using illiberal rhetoric, the EFF in South Africa has promoted pluralization and broader representational inclusion while operating within established democratic standards. The study comes to the conclusion that, depending on their setting, chronology, and relationship to institutions, populist parties in Africa can act as both challengers and correctives to dominant party systems.

Keywords: *populism, populist parties, political parties, party systems, democracies, Africa*

Introduction

Political parties and the party systems have long played a central role in political development and democratic consolidation, facilitating representation as one of the primary means of political expression and electoral engagement by various peoples and interest groups. They also aggregate collective demands and preferences expressed by citizens and provide avenues for shaping sociopolitical reasoning. In

Africa, political parties and party systems have varied considerably, with their stability patterns rapidly shifted over time and party activity closely tied to the continent's uneven democratic trajectory, which has only recently shown signs of deliberate consolidation (Nwokora et al., 2024). The history of African democracy has been rather checkered, as it was originally without the tradition of liberal democracy or liberal philosophy. It responded positively to the democratization's 'third wave' in the 1980s and 1990s, as formal Western type democratization with elections, written constitutions, human rights, strong public institutions and freely operating opposition parties had been promoted as the antidote to the continent's political and economic ills, and became more common across Africa (Schraeder, 1995; Makinda, 1996; Ihonvbere, 1996; Menocal et al., 2007; Cheru, 2012; Nwosu, 2012; Nwokora et al., 2024). The paper takes a step away from approaches that review populism within (western liberal) democracies in any pejorative sense, yielding a glance at how populism performs in long-established liberal contexts. Rather the paper by analysing populist parties in their role as democratic corrective or enhancer (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Kaltwasser, 2012; Mueller, 2019) and creators of alternative democratic realities, suggested by Sithole (2023).

Africa too has witnessed a spike in populist presence, both in and outside of (liberal) democracies, in the forms of populist parties and junta leaders as the rest of the world grapples with the bourgeoning populist politics. The advent of populism's presence and its potential implications for democracy and party systems has been a long-standing concern for populist scholars and democratic defenders alike, with questions raised about the impact of populism on democracy (Akkerman, 2003; Pasquino, 2008; Whitehead, 2020) and party system behaviour (Kitschelt, 2002; Vachudova, 2021; Wolinetz & Zaslove, 2018) in a climate where African democratic recidivism has been a constant (Bermeo, 2016; Walker & Lust, 2018; Rakner, 2021; Fomunyoh, 2020).

Multiethnic societies, historical legacies, and socioeconomic issues including neocolonialism, poverty, aid dependency, illiteracy, and ethno-religious divisions create a difficult context in which African political parties function (Elischer, 2008; Otele & Etyang, 2015). Strong opposition is still essential for limiting power and maintaining democratic health, but party systems are essentially unchanged despite democratic advancements, with dominant parties continuing while smaller parties struggle to establish themselves as legitimate rivals and issue owners (Bleck & van de Walle, 2019; Blaxland, 2023; Ottaway, 1997; Kotze & Garcia-Rivero, 2008). However, compared to its frequent affiliation with the radical right in Europe, the significance of populism inside African parties and their democratic institutions is still poorly understood (Rooduijn et al., 2012).

This paper questions how populists interact with divergent party systems in Africa, probing into what this interplay may reveal about the relationship between populism and democratic development more generally. As will be seen subsequent

sections, the theoretical puzzle sits in the context specific roles populist parties play within party systems as vehicles for the installation of democratic norms in early Uganda where democracy although constitutional was not liberal and mobilizers of democratic re-inclusion and enhancement in contemporary South Africa where democracy is both constitutional and liberal. It does this by examining populist instances in Uganda and South Africa, focusing on the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) respectively. There are two rationales for the use of these two populist parties, first of which stems from their differing generational significance as these populist parties reflect the ideological overtones and major political conditions of their respective periods of prominence, each coinciding with distinct stages in the institutionalization of democratic politics in Africa. Being specific, the NRM is an example of an early generation populism situated in the 1990s, a context of Africa experiencing a wave of democratic consolidation, mass democratic education and the formation of functional party systems. On the other hand, the EFF exemplifies a populism forged in the contemporary setting of an established democracy and a political environment with pre-defined rules of democratic engagement and a society familiar with the basic tenets of democratic culture. The second rationale is similarities in their militant populist political identities that highlight their existence as socialist-revolutionary parties defined by their opposition to Western capitalism and performative militance, as argued by Sithole (2025).

Contrary to the plentiful body of work studying populism in the Americas and Europe, literature on African populism is limited and underdeveloped, although robust contributions have been made by (Carbone, 2005; Resnick, 2010; Makulilo, 2013; Resnick, 2017/2019, Cheeseman, 2019). However, research is disproportionate in its continental distribution as immense focus is given to populism in South Africa (Calvert, 2021; Saloojee, 2013; Oxford Analytica, 2018; Nyenhuis, 2020; Roux, 2022; Batsani-Ncube, 2021; van der Westhuizen, 2023) although this is no doubt due to established preference of populist scholars to study populism within (liberal) democracies and South Africa still displaying the signs of a vibrant and (largely) functional multiparty democracy. Standard in any academic study is the provision of conceptual frameworks that help in eliminating any potential confusion or fuzziness by what is meant with certain terms, especially for hotly contested terms that have been victim to conceptual stretching through varied use. The first concept in demand of clarification is democracy, which here refers to an intersectional concept used to highlight an ideal; the practice of good governance, guarantee of rights, legitimate and institutionalized governance entrenched by a constitution and a method of political representation of the majority by representatives they select freely. Some of these rights include freedom of political expression, freedom from discrimination, and the protected functionality of other rights found in and entrenched in the constitution relative to that country (Gitonga, 1987).

The second concept to be spared from conceptual murkiness is populism. Populism within this paper is a blended conceptualization informed by the framings of Mudde & Kaltwasser (2012) and Humphries (2017). This blend believes populism to be a challenge to the political legitimacy of liberal democracies, and the normative liberal philosophies that underpin it, based on the belief that society is divided into two opposing groups, the 'pure people' and the 'elite/other', advocating for the people General Will as the sole source of political legitimacy and associated political action. Although more vital for this paper is the framing of populist parties given in the subsequent section.

Dynamics of Political Parties and Party Systems in Africa

Beginning with basic definitions, political parties are nearly universally understood as the linchpin of the political activity and principal actors in spearheading the political development within any political system, key in democratic development or authoritarian perpetuation. Giovanni Sartori, whose writings on political parties and party systems have been acknowledged as foundational (Mair, 2006; Kitschelt, 2007 in Ignazi, 2017; Bardi, 2025) conceptualizes parties as intermediary structures or institutions between society and government, representing the people by expressing their demands (Sartori, 1976). Sartori argues political parties as teams of potential decision makers offering themselves as prospective governors for the electorate who have an opportunity to choose at a general election, at least in pluralist settings (Sartori in McKenzie, 1977). Other scholars articulate parties as political organizations linking the citizenry and political elites, coordinating itself and its candidates to vie for political power in a country's elections through the mobilizations of citizens/constituents (Riak & Bill, 2022) expected also to act as aggregators of preference, recruit leaders, and channel the demands of their constituencies on various social, economic, political, legal and governance issues while connecting the public with laws and governance. Within allowances of democracies most political parties have the sole goal of obtaining political office through election (Morrison, 2004).

The relation between a political party and the party system can be likened to that of an organism and the ecosystem fostering its survival. Labuschagne explains that "if political parties fail to meet the essential obligation warranting their existence, the political system then naturally requires new structures and processes in order to articulate the interests and demands that have been left unattended and unrepresented in society" (2020:47).[1] Although it may seem that the process between old and new parties is straightforward, with new parties simply catering to the unattended interests of society, it is not, as voters are not quick to abandon established parties when they feel their new choice has a limited scope for success (Labuschagne, 2020). Labuschagne (2020:47) argues that political parties form to coordinate and refine demands made of a political system, serving as instruments of aggregation and

articulation that channel information between grassroots constituencies and party leadership.[2]

When speaking of African political parties Gero Erdmann (2004) has recognized them as having; (i) low ideological salience, (ii) a lack of clear programmatic identity visible through barely distinguishable and essentially meaningless programmes, (iii) weak bureaucratic organization which includes unreliable membership data and a poor funding base, (iv) dominance of informal relations such as patronage and clientelism as well as strong personalism, (v) lack of internal democracy, high degree of factionalism, (vi) weak formal links to civil society, (vii) and a predominantly regional or ethnic-based membership and electorate. This diagnosis of African parties is validated by a range of scholars (Ishiyama, 2003; van de Walle, 2003; Manning, 2005; Carothers, 2006; Elischer, 2008). In fact, one of the longest standing traits of African political parties is their ethnic base, that would continue even under the democratic African states where the formation of political organizations according to ethnic affiliation is prohibited (Salih, 2001).

With regard to party systems, there have been a number of ways in which they have been defined and analyzed. Some theoretical justifications pivotal to this paper are by Sartori (2005:39) who describes a party system to be "the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition" with the number of parties relevant to bargaining between them (Aylott, 2016:152) and Mboya (1963) who views party systems as instruments intended to increase the force and effectiveness of the people, they are not the end itself.

These theorizations correspond to the three models of party systems that form the basis of most party system typologies, and these models correspond to the three identified party system functions in relation to social cleavages; *aggregation*, *translation*, and *blocking* (Burnell, 2007: 169). The party system models and relevant functions as seen with Table 2 in a recreated and expanded illustration pulled from Burnell (2007). The formation of models can be said to be concerned with the reliance on the party system structure that Caporaso (2007) articulated can either be fragmented, cohesive, or encompassing.

Scholars argue that African postcolonial party systems are largely ethnocentric, with parties functioning as elite electoral vehicles and ethnicity serving as the primary basis for political mobilization, fostering the growth of ethnic and congressional parties (Horowitz, 1985; Manning, 2005:715). For Mozaffar & Scarritt (2005), Ishiyama (2014), and Manning (2005), these systems are usually dominant or single-party in nature, with low competition, low fragmentation, high volatility, and weak ideological differentiation.[3] Parties are frequently personalistic and based on clientelist or familial networks rather than organised social interests. As seen in Table 1, Sartori's typology makes a distinction between dominant authoritarian, dominant non-authoritarian, and nondominant systems in order to account for this fluidity (Erdmann & Basedau, 2007).

Table 1: Sartori's Typology of Party Systems

	Monopartism (authoritarian)	Polypartism (electoral / democratic)		
Initial stage (fluidity)	Dominant authoritarian	Dominant non-authoritarian	Non dominant	Pulverised
Structured stage (crystallisation)	One party / hegemonic	Predominant	Two-partism / multi-partism Limited / moderate pluralism Extreme / polarised pluralism	Atomised

Source: Erdmann & Basedau, 2007:7.

Table 2: Burnell's Three Models of Party System

Type of Party System	Party System Function	Number of Relevant Parties
One Party System	**Block(ing)** the politicization of social cleavages through political parties	One
Two Party System	**Aggregate** the diversity of interests across social cleavages	Two
Multi-Party System	**Translation** (and moderation) of deep, cross-cutting (unreconcilable) social cleavages allows their segmented accommodation (at the elite level)	More than two

Source: Burnell 2007: 170, Bold text not in original.

Unpacking the Postulations of Populist Parties in Party Systems

Classifying populist parties is an exercise often complicated by matters like populism's roving definition, the existence of populist parties across the Left/Right ideological spectrum and determining which parties appropriately fit the criteria expected of a populist party (Wolinetz & Zaslove, 2018; Norris, 2019; Ivaldi, 2021). Fortunately, the parties studied here have already had sufficient attention paid to their identification as populist (Mbete, 2015; Fölscher, 2020; Fölscher et al, 2021; Aiseng, 2024; Henkeman, 2024; Mancebo, 2023).

The working understanding of populist parties in this paper rests heavily on the definitional content sketched out by van Kessel (2015:13) in their work reviewing European populist parties where a minimal definition of 'populist party' is conceptualized 'classically', meaning the required presence of all aspects silhouetted in order for a party to be positively identified as populist. These aforementioned aspects are; the portrayal of 'the people' as virtuous and essentially homogeneous, advocacy of popular sovereignty, with the sole source of legitimate power and presence of a leader

claiming themselves as the only legitimate mouthpiece of said sovereign will. Power here refers to the embodied resistance against the political establishment in defence of popular sovereignty.

The structural logic of populism is reflected in the divisionary socio-political rhetoric that populist parties create, which symbolically divides "the people" from "the other" (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). These parties frequently serve as early warning systems for popular unrest in Europe that results from democratic deficiencies connected to concentrated decision-making at the EU level (Fennema, 2004). African populist parties often adopt inclusionary approaches, drawing on socialist legacies from liberation movements and addressing unemployment, poverty, unequal development, and dispossession (Cheeseman, 2019). In contrast, much scholarship focuses on European, often right-wing populism, sometimes portraying it as inherently nativist and exclusionary (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). However, some African cases show welfare chauvinism and other discriminating inclinations similar to the radical right in Europe, underscoring the variety of populist manifestations in various situations.

According to Taggart (1995) and Hans-George (1998 in Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2015), populist parties are characterised by highly centralised, top-down organisational structures that are focused on individualised, charismatic leadership, with decision-making centred around the leader and their inner circle. Without adhering to a rigid ideology, they take advantage of the ambiguity of "empty signifiers" to expand their appeal to a variety of disgruntled audiences, reflecting the ephemeral and adaptable nature of populism's central thesis—that a pure people have been deceived by a corrupt elite (Rooduijn, 2018). Populist parties are therefore "chameleonic," blending several traditions and adopting ideological stances appropriate to their environment (Taggart, 2000; van Kessel, 2015:3). Despite this flexibility, they identify who is excluded more precisely, creating "the other" in stark contrast to "the people," however nebulously defined (van Kessel, 2015).

Insofar as the normative task of political parties is to be engaged in politics populist parties, for Van Kessel (2015), do not need their followers to be directly involved in politics *necessarily* but do agitate for their participation in the political process at some level, which logically feels oxymoronic. Largely because participation in the political process, even minimally (which from van Kessel can be assumed as simply voting in elections but having no concern of participation past that), requires direct involvement in politics. This is made more paradoxical when considering that non-populist parties too only require the minimal political participation of their members.

Erdogan & Uyan-Semerci (2025) populist parties encouraging of polarisation along party lines to exacerbate societal divisions and disruptive party systems.[4] Their emergence is associated with increased electoral volatility as new parties threaten stable interparty dynamics marked by steady vote shares among existing parties, weaken

coalitions, and erode long-standing allegiances (Borges, 2021). Italy serves as an example of this; in 2022, the Five Star Movement broke away from a coalition because to an economic package that favoured the elite, which led to the resignation of Lega and Forza Italia, the collapse of the government, and early elections. By focusing on charismatic leadership, emotive appeals, and simple rhetoric, populist parties typically exacerbate these dynamics and move rivalry from programmatic, institutionalised politics to more individualised, splintered agendas.

Systems and Sentiments: Populist Parties in the Political Landscapes of Uganda and South Africa

After outlining the theoretical framework of African political parties and party systems as well as the conceptual elements of populism, the paper now looks at how parties interact within these systems, how they adopt populist roles, and how this affects the democratic quality and structure of party systems. A qualitative methodology is used for this comparative study, utilising primary texts from party websites and publications by party presidents in addition to secondary materials on party ideals and functional evolution.

To reiterate, South Africa and Uganda were selected because of their similar post-colonial histories under British control (excluding apartheid in South Africa) and political cultures influenced by liberation organizations that later became ruling parties. Both situations had distinct populist parties, negating the requirement to validate populism as a stand-alone investigation. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) were selected due to their shared populist characteristics, which include centralized leadership, performative militancy, and revolutionary rhetoric. This comparative study reviewing how populist parties interact with and shape party systems is enabled by their varying levels of party system institutionalization and democratic conditions.

The National Resistance Movement: Populism as Democratic Founding in Uganda

The National Resistance Movement (NRM), which was founded in 1986 from the National Resistance Army (NRA) and is distinguished by pro-people, plebiscitarian speech and anti-institution activities, is the first populist party analysed (Carbone, 2005). Its inclusion serves as an example of populism in early democratic Africa, where, in contrast to Western and Latin American contexts, it arose in a hollowed-out system devoid of a functional party structure following around 24 years of instability, coups, and civil war. Milton Obote destroyed Uganda's first multiparty system in 1966; this was followed by Idi Amin's coup in 1971, his removal in 1979, Obote's temporary return, and more fighting (Makara & Svåsand, 2009), which came to an

end in 1986 when Yoweri Museveni's NRA took control of Kampala and brought stability back.

In order to improve state-civil society relations through an inclusive coalition, the NRM pursued democratic reforms after taking power (Kansiime, 2019). This was mainly accomplished through its "no-party" participatory system, which was institutionalised through Resistance Councils (later Local Councils), grassroots governance structures established during the civil war (Tidemand, 2013; King & Hickey, 2017). The NRM quickly established bottom-up institutions to support its claim to represent democratic rights and freedoms as it consolidated power and legitimised its populist democratisation program (NRM, 1986; Omara-Otunnu, 1992; Furley & Katalikawe, 1997; Omach, 2008; Kiyaga-Nsubuga & Olum, 2009). It accomplished significant rural democratisation before the 1995 constitution (Mamdani, 1986), and by 1992, its discourse had made democracy more widely accepted among rural inhabitants, especially in Buganda (Karlström, 1996).[5]

Following an intensive consultative process with various interest groups, the NRM would then later oversee the reintroduction of a new consultative democratic configuration under the 1995 Constitution (Apter, 1995). Although this came after reneging on its earlier pledge to hold elections shortly after ousting the previous regime and sliding into repressiveness, notably threatening journalists with detention if they were critical of the NRA, and coordinating political repression (Omara-Otunnu, 1991/1992).[10] In addition to a strong protection of human rights and judicial independence, Uganda's 1995 Constitution provided for the possible adoption of either a movement, multi-party, or any other democratic political system of their choosing through free and fair elections (Bussey, 2005; Twinomugisha, 2009).[6] However, Article 271 stipulated that Uganda's first election under the 1995 constitution was to be under the Movement system, which enshrined a democracy with a specific electoral competition based on 'individual merit' and not party platforms (influenced by Museveni's 'no-party' philosophy) at least before the 2005 referendum that instructed the return of multiparty politics through the Political Parties and Organizations Act (Carbone, 2000; Bussey, 2005; Oloka-Onyango, 1995; Makara et al., 2009; Makara, 2010).[7]

Uganda's one-party state was justified as necessary in a society traumatized by ethnic politics and civil war, where party competition held little sway. Democracy was constitutional but not liberal: the country had a representative system yet was denied political pluralism, with Museveni arguing that multi-party systems were divisive and could inflame tribal and religious tensions (Makinda, 1996; Bussey, 2005). His promotion of the Movement also extended his power by removing term limits and weakening checks on the executive, framed as protecting the people from legalistic constraints (Carbone, 2005; Omach, 2008; Makara et al., 2009). When multipartyism returned in 2005, term limits were amended, allowing incumbents to run indefinitely (Kakuba, 2021). The adoption of the 1995 constitution had

effectively opened the door for the return of multi-party democracy by allowing a limited form of party competition, a three party system with the NRM as the dominant force, as the basis for Ugandan electoral democracy (Carbone, 2000; Kasfir, 1998 in Carbone, 2003).[8] Although limited, the NRM's populist (non-liberal) democracy was further validated by Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which alludes to liberal democracy not being a requirement for democracy, encouraging the NRM's populist (non-liberal) democracy, Only periodic, legitimate elections using universal, equal, and secret suffrage or comparable free voting systems are required under Article 21(3) to reflect the will of the people.

The Economic Freedom Fighters: Populism as Democratic Challenger in South Africa

South Africa's liberal democracy has been stable, multiparty, and institutionalised for a long time, with continuous democratic action since 1994, in contrast to early (and much of modern) Uganda. Operating within this deeply ingrained structure is the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an anti-establishment revolutionary party founded in 2013 by Julius Malema, Floyd Shivambu, and others who left or were expelled from the African National Congress (ANC) (Stewart, 2022; Mbete, 2015; Singo, 2014).Vastly different from the NRM that operated freely in a system it designed (Paret, 2016), the EFF exists within a well-ingrained and institutionalized democratic party system. Here, the EFF functions as a political alternative to the ANC's neoliberal development model, which has faced declining governance and material provision despite its liberation legacy, in a well-established democratic party system. Key features of the EFF's populism and supporting rhetorical are appeals to those left out by the social contract, largely the poor, unemployed, and disenfranchised (Adams, 2018; Roux, 2022; Bekker, 2023). The party tries to aesthetically display this through their wearing maids' uniforms and miners' boiler suits to represent their core constituents (Premhid, 2014).

A secondary role is its promotion of South Africa transition toward a true multiparty system, and away from a dominant party one by fracturing the electoral dominance and legislative majority that could be used to alter the rules of political engagement to suffocate dissent and suppress information claimed to undermine democratic institutional independence and endangering party-political competition (Botha et al., 2015).

Despite having been launched in 2013, it immediately became the third largest party and biggest winner from newcomer parties in the 2014 national election, securing 6.35% of votes in its participation and later gathering 10.8% of the vote in 2019, outdoing older and more established parties like the Inkatha Freedom Party or Freedom Front Plus, both ethno-populist parties.[9] The party's instant success is partly the outcome of it being a partially-rooted newcomer party; a 'new party

formation supported by a societal group that antedates the party at its breakthrough election' (Baldini et al., 2022) had access to a degree of pre-existing symbolic elements already known to the electorate as well as resources in the form of activists and networks from recruited personnel from other parties or movements (Braun, 2024).[5] The growth in the EFF coincided with a drop of support for the ruling African National Congress from 65.9 % in 2009, 62.2% in 2014, and 57.50% in 2019, suggesting that a sizable portion of the EFF's support came from disgruntled ANC supporters (Mbete, 2015; Obikili, 2018). Still, the growth of other parties, like the Democratic Alliance, the official opposition whose liberal, pro-capitalist politics presents an antithesis to that of the ANC and EFF, had leapt from 16.6% to 22.23% in 2009 and 2014, respectively, and dipped slightly to 20.77% in 2019, making it reasonable to infer that the EFF's growth is directly linked to the re-introduction of those voters with feelings of being excluded or overlooked by preexisting parties- a classic function of populism in liberal democracies EFF's messaging.[10]

Beyond electoral politics and voter share, the EFF has a significant impact on South African democracy. The party has pushed for the reinstatement or re-examination of policies that are particularly important to the populace, such as rectifying the unfair distribution of land in the nation, using its populist, militant attitude. Land redistribution has long been a prominent issue in South African politics; the Natives Land Act consolidated 90% of land in the hands of white people while dispossessing the black majority. A recurring political mobiliser, the problem is nevertheless complicated, entwined with history, racial relations, socioeconomic circumstances, and ideas of restorative and redistributive justice (Zukowski, 2017; du Toit, 2019; Bastani-Ncube, 2021, p.203; Zenker & Walker, 2024). The ANC supported the EFF's 2018 parliamentary resolution to amend Section 25 of the Constitution in response to campaigns that highlighted land inequality and promoted "expropriation without compensation." This was a significant change from the 1994 "willing buyer, willing seller" approach, which only resulted in 10% of land being redistributed between 1994 and 2017 (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2018).

The second example is linked to the introduction of fee-free tertiary education for 90% of students, that much like land reform the EFF had a direct hand in contributing to through the use of constant pressure and making it a core policy demand (Zukowski, 2017; Batsani-Ncube, 2021).[11]

Democratic Subversion and System Stagnation

Since coming to power in 1986 Museveni has sat as the head of state for nearly four decades, most recently being handed a seventh term in a visibly illegitimate election. It would be incorrect to attribute the NRM's authoritarianism to it being populist, as there is a list of African non-populist authoritarian regimes, or hybrid regimes. It

is, however, worth noting that it is partially facilitated by its populist rhetoric, particularly the heroic role in delivering Uganda from the hands of Idi Amin and heralding a shift towards stability, respect for human rights and erecting a democratic process propped up with a number of democratic guarantees and as well as checks and balances under its 1995 constitution (Mwenda, 2007). This is evident in the prologues of the 2021-2026 and 2026-2031 which make explicit mention of the bush war, national liberation and the specific lead played by Museveni.

Over the past decade, political repression in Uganda has increasingly targeted the country's most prominent populist opposition leaders and visible opposition movements, such as Robert Kyagulanyi, widely known as Bobi Wine. Wine has been subjected to repeated acts of state violence, including raids on his residence, harassment of his family, and sustained intimidation of his supporters. These abuses have involved arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, military trials, and reports of extrajudicial killings (Mayanja, 2026; International Federation for Human Rights, 2026). However, Wine is not the sole victim of this escalating crackdown. In 2024, veteran opposition figure Dr. Kizza Besigye, alongside 36 other activists, was abducted and later charged with treason — a move that effectively barred him from contesting the 2026 elections and further narrowed Uganda's political space. These developments reflect a continuation dating back to 1996, and intensification of patterns observed during subsequent election cycles, most notably 2020 and 2021, which were extensively documented (Kakuba, 2021; the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026). The persistence of militarized policing, suppression of opposition campaigns, and restrictions on civil liberties has fundamentally reshaped Uganda's electoral environment.

Following the most recent elections, these dynamics have become even more pronounced. President Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) secured over 78% of the vote, its highest win since 1996, when it gained a 75% (Kakuba, 2021). While the ruling party has framed this outcome as a demonstration of popular support, critics and international observers argue that the result reflects a deeply uneven political playing field characterized by voter intimidation, media restrictions, and the systematic exclusion of opposition candidates.

The focus now shifts to South Africa, where the extremely centralized and authoritarian EFF that has been argued to occasionally impede the advancement of democracy by adopting a militant revolutionary image (Duncan, 2015; van Onselen, 2018; Suttner, 2020; Mbete, 2015).[12] In its quest in confronting the sustained racial hierarchies the EFF tows a dangerous line in further inflaming racial differences. An illustration of this is its earmarking the existence of race-based enclaves like Orania and Kleinfontein, that only permit the inhabitants to be white, as threats to South African non-racialism and social cohesion that form the foundation of South Africa's democracy (Parliament of South Africa, 2025). However, it has been pointed out that the EFF's preference to acknowledge the Sotho and Nguni parts of the

national anthem, in addition to singing racially charged chants, the most famous being 'Dubul'ibhunu' (translated to 'kill the boer') itself constitutes a form of Black separatist identity that also poses a threat to the dismantling of interracial cohesion in an already deeply divided society (Parliament of South Africa, 2025; Mancebo, 2023).

Comparative Assessment of Overall Populist Impacts

While previous sections highlighted both the democratizing contributions and destabilizing effects of the NRM and EFF, a comparative assessment is needed to examine how participation patterns, institutional constraints, and populist rhetoric interact to produce divergent democratic outcomes.

A defining feature of the NRM's populist approach is the creation of Local Councils, which broadened political awareness and community involvement at the grassroots level while serving as new administrative structures that gave local populations direct authority over their own affairs. The EFF similarly places a strong emphasis on community-level mobilisation; however, Uganda's comparable participation is severely limited by political repression, whereas South Africa's local political engagement is still competitive and formally structured. Institutional settings further influence their movements: The EFF's influence is constrained by South Africa's independent judiciary, open electoral oversight, and legislative accountability, while Uganda's lax checks and balances and the NRM's strong hold on the presidency and legislature give the party complete control over political institutions. Additionally, there are differences in militancy and populist rhetoric. The NRM draws on revolutionary discourse to maintain its legitimacy as a liberation movement committed to ongoing transformation, framing its continued rule as essential to preserving the fruits of that liberation. The EFF, on the other hand, deploys combative rhetoric mainly to galvanize supporters and challenge entrenched elites, staging symbolic acts of defiance against the political establishment — though its revolutionary posture similarly serves a legitimizing function, one that parallels the role such language plays for the NRM.

Discussion and Conclusion

As populism grows as a global political force, more nuanced discussions about its role in democratic development are needed. This study moves beyond the normative, Eurocentric assessments of populism by examining how African populist parties interact differently across party system environments – and what this reveals about the continent's democratic trajectory.

Using Uganda's NRM and South Africa's EFF, the study shows that populism's political effects are neither inherently destabilizing nor uniformly democratic.

Rather, its impacts are shaped by the timing of populist emergence, the maturity of the party system, and the populist actor's relationship to state power.

The comparative analysis reveals a crucial distinction: populism as an institutional challenger versus populism as an institutional substitute. The NRM emerged amid collapsed institutions and civil war, where its early populist mobilization helped establish participatory structures and restore constitutional order. Yet as the movement consolidated power, that same populist legitimacy was increasingly used to justify executive dominance and democratic backsliding. Uganda thus illustrates how populism can shift from a tool of democratic reconstruction to a vehicle for entrenching authoritarianism in weakly institutionalized settings.

The EFF, by contrast, emerged within a mature democratic system featuring entrenched party competition and constitutional constraints. Operating as an opposition force rather than a ruling authority, it has expanded political competition, pluralized the party system, and pushed elite accountability on issues like land reform. Still, its aggressive tactics and militant rhetoric present real challenges to institutional norms and social cohesion.

Together, these cases confirm that populism's democratic effects are context-dependent, not ideologically predetermined. Where populist movements seize power in low-institutionalized environments, participatory legitimacy can become hegemonic rule. Where institutional constraints remain, populist parties are more likely to function as agents of pluralization. This shifts analytical focus from populist rhetoric to the institutional arrangements that shape its consequences.

The study thus advances broader theories of populism by highlighting party system institutionalization as a key mediating variable – and challenges binary framings of populism as either democratic threat or democratic corrective. In the African context, populist parties can play meaningful roles in democratic development, particularly where conventional parties have failed marginalized communities. That said, the risks remain real: polarization, erosion of institutional norms, and personalization of power are consistent dangers across both cases.

Ultimately, African populist parties deserve neither uncritical celebration nor blanket dismissal. Their significance lies in how they engage with existing institutions, historical legacies, and patterns of party competition. This study offers a comparative framework applicable beyond Africa, while opening avenues for future research into how shifting institutional environments shape populist strategies and democratic outcomes.

Endnotes

[1] However, the author goes on to elucidated that the formation of political parties is not always for the noble goal of articulating these abandoned or overlooked interests but that the personal interests, ambitions and political opportunism of political figures often have a stake.

[2] Their formation can stem from any number of factors – ideological, social, or identity-based – with ethnicity, region, and religion proving particularly critical in the African context, where communal divisions have historically shaped both party formation and outlook (Aderinto, 2023 in Egwim, 2024).

[3] Their tendency towards being dominant stems from their histories. Countries that inherited a dominant party system at independence would then see expansion of these single party regimes or where fragmented party systems were inherited these would typically collapse into military coups or instability (Mozaffar & Scarritt, 2005) that would then give rise to dominant parties that would behave a security guarantors and instruments of political control like in Uganda, Rwanda or Zimbabwe (Ishiyama, 2014).

[4] This too undermine democratic resilience and social cohesion through the fostering of social distance, political intolerance and moral superiority (Edrogan & Uyan-Semerci, 2025).

[5] Resistance Council's were originally implemented as part of the NRA's military and politicization strategy during the civil war. They would be used to help politicize 'liberated' villages to the ideological fundamentals of the NRM. They would also act as miniature governance structures of those villages, as the NRM would remove chiefs and instruct that all decisions be made by the village occupants directly or through deliberation by a group of people elected by the village.

[6] The Movement System seriously curtailed political partes, prohibiting them from any effective party activity including opening or operating branches, holding delegate conferences, public rallies, campaigning, or any other activity that may be viewed with interfering with the Movement political system. Obviously, the NRM was exempt from these limitations seeing as it was a movement and not a political party, only becoming a political party in 2003 (Bussey, 2005; Makara et al, 2009).

[7] System in the sense of the set of governmental institutions and relationships inducing the terms of participation and competition to access these institutions. The NRM was renamed the Movement in the 1995 constitution as an attempt to denote a separation between the liberal movement and the majoritarian party (Carbon, 2000). The basis of the Movement were the NRMs foundational populist principles of participatory democracy underpinned by their Resistance Councils, later renamed Local Councils, that formed part of a five-tier governance structure starting at the village level, to parish, sub-country, county, and district (Makara, Rakner & Svåsand, 2009).

[8] The other two parties were the Democractic Party and the Uganda People's Congress.

[9] These electoral results can be found on the electoral dashboard of the South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission accessible here: https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe, last accessed on 9/4/2026. To find the electoral results for 2014 select the year 2014 from the dropdown menu.

[10] Further elucidation clarification is needed. While the EFF carries some responsibility visible from the above electoral results in the ANC, drop-in electoral support notwithstanding, it is not the de facto reason the shift in South Africa's party system. This came at the hands of the ethno-populist party, the uMkhonto weSizwe, led by former ANC president Jacob Zuma who at one point oversaw the ousting of the EFFs Malema, was himself ejected (in a manner of speaking) from the ANC. Launched months before the 2023 election Zuma's MK party secured roughly 15% of the vote, causing the ANC to plummet to 40%.

[11] The Expropriation Act was introduced into parliament in 2020 and was signed into law in January 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg9w4n6gp5o, last accessed on 9/4/2026.

[12] The party was interestingly called a cult by former deputy president Floyd Shivambu following his departure from the organization at a press conference in late 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcVVcrfDy5U, last accessed on 9/4/2026.

References

Adams, R. (2018). South Africa's social contract: The Economic Freedom Fighters and the rise of a new constituent power? *Acta Academica, 50*(3), 102–121. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa50i3.5

Ahere, J. R. (2018). Linkages between political parties and political violence: Some lessons from Kenya and South Africa. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 18*(1), 93–117.

Aiseng, K. (2024). The Economic Freedom Fighters and politics of populism: Enhancing political participation, or a threat to democracy? In *Democratization of Africa and its impact on the global economy* (pp. 373–393). IGI Global.

Akkerman, T. (2003). Populism and democracy: Challenge or pathology? *Acta Politica, 38*(2), 147–159.

Apter, D. E. (1995). Democracy for Uganda: A case for comparison. *Daedalus, 124*(3), 155–190.

Aylott, N. (2016). The party system. In J. Pierre (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Swedish politics*. Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199665679.013.9

Baldini, G., Tronconi, F., & Angelucci, D. (2022). Yet another populist party? Understanding the rise of Brothers of Italy. *South European Society & Politics, 27*(3), 385–405. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2159625

Bardi, L. (2025). Giovanni Sartori's party system theory. *Italian Political Science Review*, 1–7.

Bartha, A., Sotiropoulos, D. A., Katsikas, D., Pap, A. L., Tóth, M., Halász, B., & Sahin, O. (2021). Populist governance and policies in Europe. *German Law Journal, 22*(SI 7), 1327–1343.

Basedau, M. (2005). *Survival and growth of political parties in Africa: Challenges and solutions towards the consolidation of African political parties in power and opposition*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Basedau, M. (2019). Party systems in Africa. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001

Basedau, M., & Stroh, A. (2012). How ethnic are African parties really? Evidence from four Francophone countries. *International Political Science Review, 33*(1), 5–24.

Batsani-Ncube, I. (2021). Governing from the opposition? Tracing the impact of EFF's niche populist politics on ANC policy shifts. *Africa Review, 12*(2), 199–216. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2021.1943145

Bekker, M. (2023). The EFF as a "gateway party"? *Review of African Political Economy, 50*(175), 107–115.

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy, 27*(1), 5–19.

Blaxland, J. (2023). Political party affiliation strength and protest participation propensity: Theory and evidence from Africa. *Social Movement Studies, 22*(4), 549–566.

Botha, H., Schaks, N., & Steiger, D. (2015). The current state of democracy in South Africa. *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee, 48*(3), 259–262.

Bussey, E. (2005). Constitutional dialogue in Uganda. *Journal of African Law, 49*(1), 1–23.

Calvert, M. (2021). *Populism in South African politics? An analysis of the EFF election manifestos in 2014 and 2019* (Doctoral dissertation). Stellenbosch University.

Caporaso, J. (2007). The three worlds of regional integration theory. In *Europeanization: New research agendas* (pp. 23–34). Palgrave Macmillan.

Carbone, G. (2000). Disguising partisanship and hegemony: A new type of democracy in Uganda? *Il Politico, 65*(4), 517–538.

Carbone, G. (2003). Political parties in a "no-party democracy." *Party Politics, 9*(4), 485–501.

Carbone, G. (2005). *"Populism" visits Africa: The case of Yoweri Museveni and no-party democracy in Uganda*. London School of Economics.

Cheeseman, N. (2019). Populism in Africa and the potential for "ethnically blind" politics. In C. de la Torre (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of global populism*. Routledge.

Cheru, F. (2012). Democracy and people power in Africa. *Third World Quarterly, 33*(2), 265–291.

De Vries, C. E., & Hobolt, S. B. (2020). Challenger parties and populism. *LSE Public Policy Review, 1*(1), Article 3.

Department of Rural Development and Land Reform. (2018). *Land audit report*. Republic of South Africa. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201802/landaudit-report13feb2018.pdf, last accessed on 9/4/2026.

Egwim, A. I. (2024). The ideology of two dominant party systems in 21st-century African neoliberal democracies: A paired comparison of Nigeria and Ghana. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 60(5), 3273–3287. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241228761

Elischer, S. (2008). Do African parties contribute to democracy? Some findings from Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum*, 43(2), 175–201.

Erdmann, G., & Basedau, M. (2007). Problems of categorizing and explaining party systems in Africa. *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07552

Erdoğan, E., & Uyan-Semerci, P. (2025). Othering in politics: How affective polarization undermines democratic philia? *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, Article 1553889.

Essop, T. (2015). Populism and the political character of the Economic Freedom Fighters: A view from the branch. *Labour, Capital & Society*, 48(1–2), 212–238.

Fölscher, M. (2020). The soft power of populist politics: *A case study of the Economic Freedom Fighters in the South African context* (Doctoral dissertation). Stellenbosch University.

Fölscher, M., De Jager, N., & Nyenhuis, R. (2021). Populist parties shifting the political discourse? A case study of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59(4), 535-558.

Fomunyoh, C. (2020). *Facing democratic backsliding in Africa and reversing the trend*. National Democratic Institute.

Furley, O., & Katalikawe, J. (1997). Constitutional reform in Uganda: The new approach. *African Affairs*, 96(383), 243–260.

Gitonga, A. K. (1987). *The meaning and foundations of democracy*. In W. O. Oyugi (Ed.), *Democratic theory and practice in Africa*.

Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2016). Understanding populist party organization. In *Political populism* (pp. 221–246). Palgrave Macmillan.

Henkeman, C. T. (2024). *The rise of nativist populism in South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation). Stellenbosch University.

Humphries, C. (2017). Populistyczne wyzwanie dla legitymizacji politycznej. *Principia*, 2017, 5–41. https://doi.org/10.4467/20843887PI.17.001.9273

Ihonvbere, J. O. (1996). Where is the third wave? A critical evaluation of Africa's non-transition to democracy. *Africa Today*, 43(4), 343–367.

International Federation for Human Rights. (2026). *Uganda: Repression threatens election credibility*. https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/uganda/uganda-repression-threatens-election-credibility, last accessed on 4/9/2026.

Ishiyama, J. (2003). Electoral systems, ethnic fragmentation, and party system volatility in sub-Saharan African countries. *Northeast African Studies*, 10(2), 203–220.

Ishiyama, J. (2014). Civil wars and party systems. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95(2), 425–447.

Ivaldi, G. (2021). The electoral basis of populist parties. In R. Heinisch, C. Holtz-Bacha, & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Political populism* (2nd ed., pp. 213–226). Nomos.

Kakuba, S. J. (2021). State repression and democratic dispensation in Uganda 1996–2016. *Sage Open*, 11(3), 21582440211030638.

Mancebo, A. (2023). Populism and parliamentary opposition parties: The Economic Freedom Fighters' behaviour in the South African Parliament. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 31(3), 815–834. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2023.2247757

Makara, S. (2010). Deepening democracy through multipartyism: The bumpy road to Uganda's 2011 elections. *Africa Spectrum*, 45(2), 81–94.

Makara, S., Rakner, L., & Svåsand, L. (2009). Turnaround: The National Resistance Movement and the reintroduction of a multiparty system in Uganda. *International Political Science Review*, 30(2), 185–204.

Makulilo, A. B. (2013). When "populists" become "unpopular." *The African Review*, 40(1), 58–92.

Makinda, S. M. (1996). Democracy and multi-party politics in Africa. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34(4), 555–573.

Majavu, P. (2021). *A critical study of the political identity and ideology of the Economic Freedom Fighters* (Doctoral dissertation). University of South Africa.

Mamdani, M. (1987). Uganda today. *Ufahamu*, 15(3), 42.

Manyanja, E. N. (2026). Uganda's Autocratic Political System Is Failing Its People – and Threatens the Region. *The Conversation*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.64628/AAJ.qeegdnqju.

Mbete, S. (2015). The Economic Freedom Fighters – South Africa's turn towards populism? *Journal of African Elections*, 14(1), 35–59.

McKenzie, R. T. (1977). Political parties revisited. *Government and Opposition*, 12(4), 527–530. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017257X00017814

Menocal, A. R., Rakner, L., & Fritz, V. (2007). *Democratisation's third wave and the challenges of democratic deepening*. Irish Aid Working Paper.

Mozaffar, S., & Scarritt, J. R. (2005). The puzzle of African party systems. *Party Politics*, 11(4), 399–421. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068805053210

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (Eds.). (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas*. Cambridge University Press.

Norris, P. (2019). Varieties of populist parties. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 45(9–10), 981–1012.

Nwokora, Z., Pak, A., & Pelizzo, R. (2024). The conditional effects of party system change on economic growth in Africa. *Acta Politica*, 61, 104–131. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-024-00366-2

Nwosu, B. U. (2012). Tracks of the third wave. *Review of African Political Economy*, 39(131), 11–25.

Nyenhuis, R. (2020). The political struggle for "the people." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 58(4), 409–432. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2020.1746040

Obikili, N. (2018). *Unfulfilled expectations and populist politics*. Economic Research Southern Africa Working Paper 722.

Oloka-Onyango, J. (1995). Constitutional transition in Museveni's Uganda. *Journal of African Law*, 39(2), 156–172.

Omach, P. (2008). The search for political consensus in Uganda. *The African Review*, 35(1–2), 74–92.

Omara-Otunnu, A. (1991). The challenge of democratic pluralism in Uganda. *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 20(1), 41–49.

Omara-Otunnu, A. (1992). The struggle for democracy in Uganda. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30(3), 443–463.

Oxford Analytica. (2018). *Rising South African populism will divide parties*. Expert Briefings. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB230627

Paret, M. (2016). Contested ANC hegemony. *African Affairs*, 115(460), 419–442.
Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. (2025). *Orania and Kleinfontein pose grave danger to our democracy, says EFF*. https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/orania-and-kleinfontein-pose-grave-danger-our-democracy-says-eff, last accessed on 9/4/2026.
Pasquino, G. (2008). Populism and democracy. In *Twenty-first century populism* (pp. 15–29). Palgrave Macmillan.
Rakner, L. (2021). Don't touch my Constitution! *Global Policy*, 12, 95–105.
Resnick, D. (2010). *Opposition parties and populist strategies* (PhD thesis). Cornell University.
Resnick, D. (2017). Populism in Africa. In *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 101–120). Oxford University Press.
Resnick, D. (2019). *Populist politics in Africa.* Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics.
Rooduijn, M. (2018). What unites the voter bases of populist parties? *European Political Science Review*, 10(3), 351–368.
Rooduijn, M., de Lange, S. L., & van der Brug, W. (2014). A populist Zeitgeist? *Party Politics*, 20(4), 563–575. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811436065
Roux, T. (2022). Constitutional populism in South Africa. In *Anti-constitutional populism* (pp. 99–137). Cambridge University Press.
Saloojee, A. (2013). After the centenary. In *The future we chose* (pp. 181–198). Africa Institute of South Africa.
Singo, L. (2014). Julius Malema: A racist or a nationalist? *The African Review*, 41(2), 260–271.
Stewart, S. L. (2022). *The rise of populist electoral politics* (Doctoral thesis). University of Oxford.
Taggart, P. (1995). New populist parties in Western Europe. *West European Politics*, 18(1), 34–51. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01402389508425056
Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Open University Press.
Twinomugisha, B. K. (2009). The role of the judiciary in Uganda. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 9(1), 1–22.
Vachudova, M. A. (2021). Populism, democracy, and party system change. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24(1), 471–498.
van de Walle, N. (2003). Presidentialism and clientelism in Africa. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41(2), 297–321.
van der Westhuizen, C. (2023). From the leader or from the led? *Comparativ*, 33(4), 460–479.
van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist parties in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Whitehead, L. (2020). 'Aversive' democracy. *Journal of North African Studies*, 25(6), 881–895.Wolinetz, S., & Zaslove, A. (Eds.). (2018). Absorbing the blow. ECPR Press.
Zenker, O., & Walker, C. (2024). Beyond expropriation without compensation. In *Beyond expropriation without compensation* (pp. 3–32). Cambridge University Press.