# The Rise of Populism and Its Impact on African Governance

| Authors Information | Abstract & Keywords: |
|---|---|

**Name of the Authors:**
[1]Robin Lee, [2]Jennifer Baker, [3]Joshua Sanchez PhD, [4]Paul Huffman, [5]Sharon Singh

**Affiliations of the Authors:**
[1]Department of Information Technology, Alpine Institute of Technology, Switzerland,[2]Department of Information Technology, Global Policy School, Brazil,[3]Department of Political Science, Global Policy School, Brazil,[4]Department of Business Administration, Alexandria School of Governance, Egypt, [5]Department of Political Science, Zenith Institute of Technology, India
**\*Corresponding author:**
   Robin Lee

**Abstract**

Populism has surged in Africa over recent decades, reshaping political landscapes and governance mechanisms across the continent. This article reviews the historical development, core features, and impact of populist politics on African governance. It examines the strategies populist leaders employ, their effects on institutions, democracy, and policymaking, and offers a comparative analysis across several African countries. The article concludes with policy implications and recommendations for navigating the populist wave.

**Keywords**: Populism, African politics, governance, democracy, political institutions, leadership strategies, policymaking, comparative analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Populism, characterized by appeals to the grievances of ordinary people against established elites, has become increasingly influential in African politics. Leaders and movements use polarizing rhetoric and charismatic performances to legitimize authority and bypass conventional institutions[1][2]. The phenomenon's recent spread reflects intense dissatisfaction with governance, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, and distrust in political elites.

**Key Questions:**

- How has populism evolved historically in the African context?
- What are the core features distinguishing African populism?
- How has the rise of populism affected democratic institutions, policy, and social cohesion?

**Historical Development and Features**
**Waves of Populism in Africa**
Populism in Africa predates its recent global prominence:

- **First wave:** During nationalist campaigns against colonial rule in the 1950s and early 1960s, early African leaders employed populist language to mobilize mass support.
- **Second wave:** Post-independence, opposition parties framed governing elites as failing popular expectations.
- **Third wave:** Under one-party systems, politicians used populist strategies to build local support bases, even within authoritarian contexts.
- **Fourth wave:** The rise of multi-party democracy in the 2000s brought explicit populist leaders and parties to the fore, drawing on frustrations with economic inequality and political marginalization[3].

### Core Attributes
Studies note several attributes defining African populism:

| Attribute | Description |
|---|---|
| Charismatic Leadership | Direct leader-public engagement, often bypassing institutions and elites[2][1]. |
| Elite vs The People | Use of anti-elite, anti-establishment discourse; equating leaders with "the masses"[4][5]. |
| Identity Mobilization | Ethnic, racial, and class-based appeals to excluded or marginalized groups[6][5]. |
| Quick Fix Solutions | Advocacy for swift, visible actions, often outside standard frameworks[6]. |
| Weak Policy Ideologies | Mix of leftist and rightist rhetoric, focused more on performance and symbolism than ideology[6]. |

Populism in Africa is not easily categorized as left- or right-wing; many leaders blend economic nationalism, anti-imperialism, and traditional values to craft broad

populist appeals[6][3].

## Current Trends and Drivers

- **Socioeconomic Inequality:** Widespread poverty, unemployment, and lack of social mobility fuel grievances that populists exploit[5][7].
- **Weak Institutions:** Enduring state fragility and legacies of personalistic rule create an environment where populist "strongmen" thrive[7][2].
- **Corruption Scandals:** Perceived or real elite corruption enables populist actors to paint themselves as saviors of the people[8][9].
- **Global Influences:** The global rise of populism indirectly legitimizes such movements in Africa, leading to cross-continental synergies in rhetoric and strategies[7][10].

# IMPACT ON GOVERNANCE

## Institutional Impact

- **Erosion of Checks and Balances:** Populist leaders often seek to undermine judicial independence and weaken parliaments, concentrating power in the executive[7][1].
- **Policymaking Volatility:** Policies may become inconsistent, shifting rapidly to reflect the latest populist priorities, and often bypass regular consultation mechanisms[11][5].
- **Polarization:** Populist rhetoric fosters political and societal divisions, sometimes escalating to xenophobia or ethnic tensions, as seen in South Africa and Côte d'Ivoire[5][12].

## Effects on Democracy

- **Democratic Erosion:** While populists claim to represent "the people," they sometimes use popular support as justification to bypass constitutional norms and press freedoms[1][5].
- **Increased Participation:** Populist movements invigorate segments of society previously excluded from mainstream politics, boosting political mobilization among marginalized populations[9][6].
- **Authoritarian Reversals:** In some cases, populism has fueled an upswing in authoritarian practices, with populist leaders using mass appeal to legitimize repressive actions, including media crackdowns and electoral manipulation[7][5].

## Socioeconomic Policy Implications

- **Redistributive Politics:** Populist leaders often promise quick solutions to poverty and unemployment, such as handouts or subsidies, but with mixed results for long-term development[6][9].
- **Anti-corruption Drives:** Many populists campaign on anti-corruption platforms but sometimes conflate anti-elite rhetoric with genuine institutional reform, leading to politicized prosecutions[9].
- **Foreign Policy Shifts:** "National interest" narratives lead to more assertive or inward-focused foreign policies, affecting regional and international partnerships[9].

## Comparative Country Examples

| Country | Populist Actors | Governance Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| South Africa | Economic Freedom Fighters, Zuma wing | Increased polarization; weakened ANC dominance; exclusionary, radical rhetoric[12][5]. |
| Tanzania | President Magufuli | Popular anti-corruption campaigns, but also erosion of institutional checks and media freedom[6][5]. |
| Nigeria, Kenya | Opposition figures, military rulers | Mobilized anti-corruption, but increased political instability, weakened institutions[9]. |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Opposition, foreign disinfo actors | Electoral volatility, weakened trust in democratic institutions, foreign interference[5]. |
| Senegal | Ousmane Sonko | Youth-driven populist opposition challenging entrenched elites, legal repression[5]. |

# GRAPHS & DATA VISUALIZATION

**Figure 1: Countries in Africa Experiencing Deterioration in Governance (2014–2023)**

**Figure 2: Share of Africans Living Under Declining Governance**

| Year | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|
| 2014 | 62 |
| 2023 | 78 |

**Figure 3: Key Governance Features Associated with Populism**

| Feature | Trend Across Africa |
|---|---|
| Erosion of democracy | Rising |
| Authoritarian resurgence | Increasing |
| Social polarization | Intensifying |
| Elite-political trust | Declining |

"The rise of global populism and 'strongmen' leaders is fueling an upswing of authoritarianism across Africa... 78% of Africans live in countries where security and democracy have worsened between 2014 and 2023." [7]

**Opportunities and Challenges**
**Positive Aspects**
- Populist actors catalyze grassroots engagement and raise unresolved socioeconomic issues for political debate[9][6].
- Their rise may force traditional parties to address longstanding grievances and reform elitist practices.

**Risks**
- Populist authoritarianism threatens civil liberties, minority rights, and rule of law[7][1].
- Deepening polarization may hinder policy consensus and undermine nation-building[5][12].
- Short-term "quick fixes" risk obscuring the need for long-term structural reform[6].

**Policy Implications and Recommendations**
- Reinforce judicial independence and transparent electoral processes to guard against populist overreach.
- Invest in inclusive, responsive governance to address root grievances before populists can exploit them.
- Foster civic education and media literacy to counteract polarizing narratives and misinformation.
- Support regional and continental mechanisms for democratic accountability and rule of law.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of populism in Africa has brought new energy and urgency to political debates but also threatens to erode hard-won democratic gains. Effective governance in the populist era requires balancing popular accountability with protection for institutions, minority rights, and the rule of law. Only then can Africa's diverse societies translate populist mobilization into lasting political, economic, and social progress.

## REFERENCES

1. Resnick, Danielle. "Populist Politics in Africa." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Politics*, 2019.
2. Glaser, Daryl, et al. "Historical and Contemporary Expressions of Populism in Africa." University of the Witwatersrand, 2025.
3. Yogo, Edouard E. "Crisis of Democratic Political Legitimacy and Emerging Populism in Africa." Populism Studies, 2025.
4. Morieson, Nicholas. "The Rise of Populist Parties in South Africa and the End of the ANC's Parliamentary Majority." Populism Studies, 2024.
5. "Macroeconomic and Institutional Consequences of Populism: A Case Study from Africa." SSRN, 2024.
6. "Overview of Cross-Continent Rising Populism and Its Impact on Governance." Journal of Political Development, 2025.
7. Hassan, H.A. "Populist Transformations and the Crisis of Governance in Africa." Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences, 2025.
8. "Global Rise of Populism Fueling Growth of Authoritarianism Across Africa." iAfrica, 2024.
9. "Populist Transformations and the Crisis of Governance in Africa." Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences, 2025.
10. "Populism in Africa." The Oxford Handbook of Populism, Oxford University Press, 2017.
11. "Chapter 37: Populism in Africa." *Research Handbook on Populism*, Edward Elgar, 2024.
12. "Populist Politics in Africa." Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 2019.
13. "Africa's Populist Trap." The Ideas Letter, 2025.