



## **Populism and Democratic Backsliding in Africa: An Administrative Nightmare**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The rise of populism has become a pressing challenge to democratic governance, resulting in the gradual erosion of institutional checks and balances, judicial independence and political pluralism across both Western and African contexts. Democratic backsliding, driven by economic inequality, cultural anxiety, and declining trust in institutions, has allowed populist leaders to consolidate power, delegitimise opposition, and weaken civil liberties. This study examined populism and democratic backsliding in Africa using a purely qualitative approach, relying exclusively on secondary data sources. Guided by democratic backsliding theory, the findings reveal that in Western contexts such as the United States, Hungary, and Poland, populist leaders have exploited institutional weaknesses to centralise power, delegitimise opposition, and undermine judicial independence. Similar patterns emerge in Africa, where leaders in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Senegal have used populist rhetoric to justify constitutional amendments, restrict media freedoms, and securitise governance, thereby shrinking democratic space. In Nigeria, populist mobilisation has often been intertwined with institutional weakening. Leaders have employed anti-corruption narratives, managed economic crises, and invoked security emergencies to consolidate executive dominance and curtail civil liberties. These trends have been reinforced by selective law enforcement, contested elections, and elite party defections, which undermine political pluralism. Across all contexts, the study identifies economic inequality, cultural anxiety, and declining trust in democratic institutions as key drivers of populist appeal and its corrosive effects. The study recommends strengthening judicial independence, enhancing political accountability, promoting media literacy and civic education, and addressing socio-economic grievances to restore institutional integrity and prevent further erosion of democratic norms globally.

**Keywords:** *Populism, Democratic Backsliding, Democracies, Institutions, Civic Education*



## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, populism has emerged as a formidable and destabilising force across many Western democracies. Once considered resilient strongholds of liberal governance, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Poland, and Italy have witnessed the gradual erosion of democratic norms under the growing influence of populist leaders and movements. Populism, characterised by its anti-elitist rhetoric, personalistic leadership, and the creation of a sharp divide between “the people” and “the elite,” has thrived on deepening economic grievances, cultural anxieties, and the loss of trust in traditional institutions (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Although populism is not inherently authoritarian, it often poses serious risks to liberal democracy when it weakens judicial independence, restricts media freedom, manipulates electoral processes, and undermines the rule of law (Mounk, 2018).

Democratic backsliding, which refers to the steady decline in the quality of democratic governance and the weakening of its institutional pillars, frequently accompanies the rise of populism (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Unlike the abrupt military coups that characterised earlier forms of authoritarianism, modern democratic erosion tends to unfold gradually through legally sanctioned mechanisms. Populist leaders often come to power through legitimate elections, only to use that very mandate to dismantle democratic norms from within. They weaken checks and balances, capture the judiciary, restrict civil liberties, and attack dissenting voices while claiming to represent the will of the people (Luhmann & Lindberg, 2019). This process, commonly known as executive aggrandisement or constitutional regression, allows democratic institutions to retain their formal appearance but empties them of their real substance (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018).

Examples of this phenomenon abound across Western societies. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has restructured the country’s liberal institutions through constitutional amendments and the consolidation of media ownership, turning democratic institutions into tools of personal power (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). In Poland, the Law and Justice Party has similarly curtailed the independence of the judiciary and politicised public broadcasting (Sadurski, 2019). In the United States, long celebrated as the model of democratic endurance, the presidency of Donald Trump exposed the fragility of democratic institutions. His repeated attacks on the press, refusal to accept the 2020 election results, and involvement in the January 6th Capitol riot demonstrated how populist rhetoric and executive overreach can deeply undermine democratic stability (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Washington Post, 2021).



The resurgence of populism is closely associated with the structural transformations of the global economy. Factors such as economic globalisation, widening social inequality, and a cultural backlash against immigration and multiculturalism have provided fertile ground for populist narratives (Rodrik, 2018; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Technological innovations, particularly the rise of social media, have further accelerated the spread of populist ideologies by amplifying misinformation and weakening the gatekeeping role of traditional democratic institutions (Tucker et al., 2022).

Although most studies have concentrated on populism in the Western world, the phenomenon has increasingly taken root in Africa, where it reflects distinct historical, socio-economic, and institutional dynamics. In many African countries, populism intersects with the enduring legacies of colonial rule, fragile democratic systems, and entrenched ethnic and religious divisions (Resnick, 2017). Leaders in states such as South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda often deploy populist rhetoric to consolidate authority, portraying themselves as champions of the common people while weakening institutional constraints (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015). In Nigeria, populism manifests at both the national and regional levels through ethno-religious appeals, patronage politics, and promises of rapid social transformation. While Nigerian populist leaders frequently present themselves as anti-elite reformers, they sometimes erode democratic accountability through executive overreach, politicisation of anti-corruption bodies, and manipulation of state security agencies (Olonisakin, 2020). This pattern reflects a broader trend in Africa where populism not only threatens liberal democratic values but also intensifies governance weaknesses, fosters polarisation, and sustains recurring cycles of democratic fragility.

## 1.2 Conceptual Clarifications

### Democratic Backsliding

The Global State of Democracy 2019 defines democratic backsliding as the gradual weakening of checks on government and civil liberties by democratically elected governments. Democratic backsliding is an incremental, partly concealed institutional change that is legitimised by references to popular electoral mandates, majority decisions, and laws. It is often driven by the intentional dismantling of accountability institutions. Other forms of democratic erosion are generally not driven by such explicit intentions. While not all countries experiencing democratic erosion necessarily experience democratic backsliding, the countries that experience democratic backsliding always do so as part of a process of democratic erosion.



While democratic backsliding may result in a breakdown of democracy and the (re-)installation of an authoritarian regime, it may also leave the fundamentals of a democracy intact and remain confined to a permanent loss of democratic quality (Tamang, 2024). Determining the endpoint of a backsliding process is difficult because many episodes of backsliding have occurred gradually and may have begun only recently. Incumbent elites need and claim to sustain the public façade of democracy and try to frame the unchecked exercise of executive authority as a deepening of democracy. Democratic legitimacy continues to be a requirement of, and a constraint on, these elite actions, preventing incumbents from openly promoting autocratic rule. The term democratic backsliding focuses on the process itself and is therefore more open to different possible final states of backsliding (Tarnang, 2024)

The Global State of Democracy 2019 identifies democratic backsliding as a form of democratic erosion. When country-level declines in one or more aspects of democracy are observed, but these declines do not fit the conceptual and quantitative description of democratic backsliding, these are referred to as other forms of democratic erosion or democratic deterioration (two terms which are used interchangeably in the report)

### **Populism**

Populists typically define “the people” based on their socioeconomic class, ethnicity, or nationality. Populists define “the elite” as an amorphous entity made up of a political, economic, cultural, and media establishment that places its own interests, along with those of other interest groups such as immigrants, labour unions, and large corporations, over the interests of “the people (Vitale and Girard, 2022). The ideational approach further holds that these basic characteristics of populism are often found in other ideologies, such as nationalism, classical liberalism, or socialism. In this manner, populists can be found anywhere along the political spectrum, allowing for both conservative and liberal populism. Populist movements are often led by dominating charismatic figures who claim to act as “the voice of the people” in government. For example, in his January 2017 inaugural address, self-proclaimed populist U.S. President Donald Trump stated, “For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost (Vitale and Girard, 2022).

In contrast to the ideational version, Rodrik's (2018) definition of populism views it as an emancipating social force that seeks to help marginalised groups challenge well-established dominant ruling structures. Economists sometimes associate populism with governments that appeal to the people by undertaking extensive public spending programs financed by loans from foreign countries rather than by domestic taxes, a practice that can result in hyperinflation,



and eventually, painful emergency belt-tightening measures. When the term is referred to negatively, populism is sometimes used synonymously with “demagogy,” the practice of applying overly simplistic answers to complex issues in a flamboyantly emotional manner, or with political “opportunism,” attempting to please voters without considering rational and carefully thought-out solutions to problems.

Populism in the context of this paper is a political style that claims to speak for the people against the elite. It can be right-wing or left-wing, and it can be disruptive and threatening to democracy. Populism is a political movement that attempts to appeal to “the people” by convincing them that its leaders alone represent them and their concerns that are being ignored by a real or perceived “elite establishment.” Since the late 19th century, the label “populist” has been applied to a range of politicians, political parties, and movements, often negatively by their opponents.

### **The Landscape of Democratic Backsliding**

After the enormous expansion of democracy that started in the 1980s and gained momentum after the end of the Cold War, global levels of democracy have steadily declined since the mid-2000s (Rodrik, 2018). Central to this global democratic recession is the democratic backsliding processes of political change in which countries that enjoy a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic. The democratic recession also includes two related phenomena: first, the hardening of autocratic rule in countries that have moved from some form of partial or soft authoritarianism to a harder form of authoritarianism (as in Belarus and Cambodia in recent years) and second, democratic tremors, where the rise of illiberal forces in a democracy causes concern about the system’s health but does not bring about the systemic changes necessary to seriously erode it (as with the rise of right-wing populist parties in Germany and Sweden).

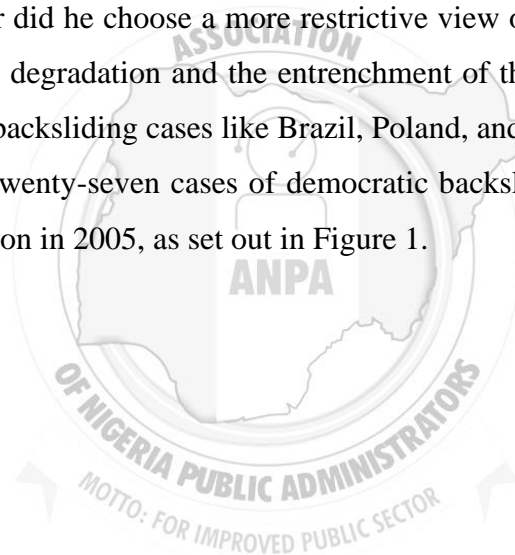
In order to be classified as a democratic backslider, a country needs to meet two conditions: it must have achieved a significant level of democracy and then experienced a significant erosion of democratic institutions. Although these two criteria may seem intuitive, both involve inevitably subjective judgment calls about what constitutes a significant level of democracy and significant erosion.

Regarding the former, we take a relatively inclusive approach, considering a country to have reached a significant level of democracy when at least two major democracy indices described the country as being at least an electoral democracy (or equivalent) at some point since 2005. This approach does bring in several countries where democratic transitions only developed shallow roots, like in Ethiopia and Myanmar, but it corresponds to the generally



inclusive way that the international community has perceived the global expansion of democracy.

Perry (2021) noted that the threshold for democratic decline is similarly inclusive and includes countries that underwent a qualitative rating decline or had been highlighted as a backslider by at least two major democracy indices. He includes both countries that have undergone backsliding at the hands of elected governments, as in Brazil and India, and those that have experienced military coups, as in Egypt and Myanmar. He then removed cases that saw a subsequent democratic rebound (that is, an improvement in scores) between their initial decline and the present; a small but significant group of countries, including Ecuador, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Zambia, were able to reverse antidemocratic tides during these years. In so doing, we have sought a middle path. He did not include countries where decline is so far only mild and democracy is still functional; our list, therefore excludes countries like Mauritius and Niger. Nor did he choose a more restrictive view of backsliding, which would require deep institutional degradation and the entrenchment of the incumbent, as that would exclude some important backsliding cases like Brazil, Poland, and the United States. Our approach produces twenty-seven cases of democratic backsliding since the onset of the global democratic recession in 2005, as set out in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Democratic Backsliders Since 2005**



**Carothers and Hartnett (2022).**

Looking at this figure, one crucial aspect of the backsliding phenomenon stands out. Backsliding has almost entirely taken place in the Global South and the former Communist countries, including the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Yugoslavia. The vast majority of these countries liberalised during democracy's "third wave" during the 1980s and 1990s (Popescu, 2022). Despite gloomy narratives about democratic backsliding being a worldwide phenomenon, its impact has not been strongly felt in the democracies of Western, Northern, or Southern Europe; North America; East Asia; or Oceania. Although some countries in these regions have experienced various democratic tremors, usually related to the rise of political figures and parties on the populist right, they have not experienced backsliding (Lord and Vogt, 2021). The notable exception to this latter point, of course, is the United States, which is an outlier among wealthy established democracies in terms of the level of its democratic erosion, which has been marked by extreme political polarisation, the rejection of an election result by an incumbent president, and an attempted insurrection against the legislative branch.



This sharp divide between where backsliding has and has not been occurring is rarely noted in discussions of democracy's global woes. Instead, the picture presented is usually that of a global democratic malaise affecting democracies everywhere. It is, of course true that some political phenomena that are associated with democratic troubles, like heightened citizen alienation from established political parties, appear across every region. Yet actual backsliding has not. In short, the phenomenon of backsliding is much more about a failure of new or emerging democracies to consolidate than it is about deconsolidation in long-standing democracies.

### **Drivers of Democratic Backsliding**

The global resurgence of democratic backsliding has become a defining feature of twenty-first-century politics, prompting intense scholarly debate about its underlying causes. While multiple explanations have been proposed, ranging from systemic pressures to cultural dynamics, the evidence increasingly suggests that the decline of liberal democracy is primarily driven by domestic political factors. External influences and structural transformations, such as the assertiveness of authoritarian powers or the disruptive potential of digital technologies, play a role, but these forces typically operate through pre-existing national conditions. Overarching explanations are valuable for identifying shared trends, yet they risk oversimplifying the deeply contextual and institutionally contingent nature of democratic regression across different regions.

One prominent line of explanation emphasises the external influence of authoritarian powers, particularly Russia and China. According to Oner (2021), these states actively seek to undermine liberal democratic norms through military aggression, economic leverage, cyber operations, and election interference. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's assertiveness in the South China Sea exemplify strategies designed to erode the liberal international order and promote authoritarian models of governance. However, this externalist view fails to explain democratic backsliding in countries with limited ties to either power. The experiences of India under Narendra Modi, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and Poland under the Law and Justice Party reveal that the primary drivers of democratic regression are largely domestic. Even in cases where relationships with authoritarian states exist, such as Hungary under Viktor Orbán or Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro, these alliances generally reinforce pre-existing autocratic tendencies rather than instigate them. Thus, while external authoritarian influence can serve as a stabilising force for existing autocracies, it is rarely the fundamental catalyst of democratic decline (Oner, 2021).



Another significant factor often discussed is technological disruption and the rise of digital authoritarianism. Social media and digital communication technologies have transformed political discourse by facilitating the spread of misinformation, amplifying hate speech, eroding journalistic standards, and deepening political polarisation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Governments increasingly exploit surveillance tools such as facial recognition and spyware to monitor opposition figures and suppress dissent. However, as Diamond (2019) argues, these technologies do not inherently cause democratic backsliding. Many countries with high internet penetration, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, remain robust democracies. Conversely, several countries that have experienced democratic decline, such as Benin or Sudan, possess relatively low levels of digital connectivity. This suggests that technology functions as an enabler or accelerator of authoritarian practices rather than as an autonomous driver. Moreover, digital platforms have had ambivalent effects, simultaneously empowering populist leaders and expanding avenues for civic engagement. As Tufekci (2017) notes, social media can mobilise grassroots movements, enhance transparency, and broaden participation. Therefore, explanations that attribute democratic regression solely to technological change risk adopting a deterministic perspective that overlooks the decisive role of political agency and institutional design.

Political polarisation represents another key dimension of democratic erosion. Deep partisan divisions create an “us versus them” dynamic that encourages leaders and citizens alike to justify the erosion of institutional norms for perceived partisan advantage (McCoy & Somer, 2019). This phenomenon has been vividly observed in the United States, Turkey, and Brazil. However, polarisation often emerges as a byproduct of autocratization rather than its root cause. In Poland, polarisation intensified after the illiberal reforms of the Law and Justice Party, while in Turkey, it followed President Erdoğan’s consolidation of executive power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Similarly, in the Philippines under President Duterte, polarisation remained relatively low despite a substantial democratic decline. These patterns suggest that polarisation may entrench authoritarian tendencies once backsliding begins, but is seldom the initial trigger of institutional decay.

A further explanation often proposed links democratic backsliding to performance failures and rising inequality. The argument holds that when democratic governments fail to deliver tangible socioeconomic outcomes, citizens become disillusioned and more receptive to populist or authoritarian alternatives. However, empirical evidence provides mixed support for this thesis. Many countries that have experienced democratic regression were, paradoxically, performing well economically before backsliding. India recorded an average GDP growth rate



exceeding 6 per cent between 2000 and 2012, while Poland posted the highest growth rate in Central Europe before its democratic downturn (Freedom House, 2022). Similarly, Tanzania under John Magufuli and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte enjoyed periods of economic expansion even as democratic freedoms contracted. This weakens the argument that economic stagnation directly precipitates autocratization. Inequality, although intuitively compelling, does not consistently align with patterns of democratic decline. Brazil, Serbia, and Hungary, for instance, experienced declines in inequality before democratic regression (OECD, 2021). In the United States, the rise of populism has often been attributed to economic grievances, yet studies show that Trump voters in 2016 had higher median incomes than Clinton supporters, suggesting that cultural rather than economic factors were more decisive (Fukuyama, 2018).

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theory of democratic consolidation and backsliding was propounded by **Juan J. Linz** and Alfred Stepan (1996), who were among the first to rigorously theorise the processes through which democracies stabilise and, conversely, weaken. Linz and Stepan argue that a democracy becomes consolidated when democracy becomes "the only game in town" institutionally, behaviorally, and attitudinally. That is, when no significant political actors seek to overthrow the democratic system, when institutions function in accordance with democratic norms, and when the public widely accepts democratic procedures as legitimate.

The assumptions of democratic consolidation theory rest on the idea that sustaining democracy requires not only electoral competition but also the development of robust institutions, the rule of law, civil society engagement, and a political culture supportive of democratic norms. Consolidation is a gradual process wherein democratic practices become deeply embedded in political life, making the reversal to authoritarianism increasingly unlikely. However, the theory also acknowledges that this consolidation can stagnate or reverse under certain pressures, leading to democratic backsliding, a concept that has gained significant traction in the 21st century.

Democratic backsliding theory, while building on the work of Linz and Stepan, has been further refined by scholars such as Nancy Bermeo (2016), who defined backsliding as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy." According to Bermeo and others, backsliding is no longer characterised by military coups or sudden regime collapse, but rather by **incremental erosion** of democratic checks and balances, the suppression of dissent, and executive aggrandisement. This new form



of democratic decline is often subtle and legal, occurring within the bounds of democratic institutions but subverting their core purposes.

This theoretical framework is highly relevant to the study of populism and democratic backsliding in the West. In recent years, Western democracies have experienced growing threats not from external enemies, but from populist leaders who rise to power through democratic means and then proceed to undermine democratic norms once in office. For example, in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and even the United States under Donald Trump, elected populist leaders have curtailed judicial independence, attacked the media, and manipulated electoral rules to entrench their power. These actions reflect the logic of democratic backsliding as theorised by Bermeo and are facilitated by the erosion of democratic consolidation.

### **Populism and Democratic Backsliding in the West**

Populism has emerged as one of the defining political phenomena of the 21st century, particularly within Western democracies, where it has frequently led to democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual decline in the quality of democracy and the erosion of institutional checks and balances, civil liberties, and the rule of law. While populism can exist within democratic systems, its authoritarian tendencies, especially when coupled with nationalist and anti-pluralist ideologies, have undermined democratic institutions in several countries. This essay expands on the dynamics of populism and democratic regression using detailed case studies from Hungary, Poland, the United States, Italy, and France.

Hungary offers perhaps the clearest example of populism's institutional impact on a Western democracy. Since 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have transformed Hungary from a liberal democracy into what Orbán himself termed an "illiberal state" (Krekó, 2020). Through constitutional amendments, Orbán curtailed judicial independence, centralised media ownership under pro-government figures, and manipulated electoral laws to secure indefinite political dominance (Freedom House, 2023). For instance, the 2013 media laws created the National Media and Information Communications Authority, effectively bringing all major media outlets under state influence. This erosion of press freedom and judicial independence represents textbook democratic backsliding driven by populist consolidation of power.

Poland mirrors Hungary's trajectory, especially since the Law and Justice Party (PiS) assumed power in 2015. Under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, the PiS government launched a broad offensive against judicial independence. The Constitutional Tribunal was filled with loyalists, and legislation allowed the executive to forcibly retire Supreme Court



judges, drawing condemnation from the European Union (Sadurski, 2019). PiS has also exerted tight control over public broadcasting, turning it into a platform for partisan propaganda, and has introduced education reforms to promote nationalist narratives. These developments reveal how populist parties use their democratic mandates to dismantle institutional autonomy while maintaining electoral legitimacy.

In the United States, the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) demonstrated how populism can destabilise even the most entrenched democratic institutions. Trump's administration was marked by open hostility to the media, the judiciary, and the intelligence community. He frequently dismissed unfavourable news as “fake news,” encouraged political violence, and defied institutional norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The culmination of this populist escalation occurred during the 2020 presidential election, when Trump refused to concede defeat and falsely claimed widespread voter fraud. His rhetoric incited the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, a direct attack on the democratic process (Washington Post, 2021). Although the United States retained its democratic framework, these events revealed how populist leaders can foster mass distrust in democratic institutions, with lasting effects on political polarisation and institutional credibility.

Italy provides another instructive example of populist volatility. The rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the right-wing League reshaped Italy's political landscape from 2013 onwards. While these populist parties have not dismantled democratic institutions in the way seen in Hungary or Poland, they have weakened democratic norms through anti-immigrant policies, Euroscepticism, and contempt for the press and judiciary. Matteo Salvini, leader of the League, as interior minister in 2018–2019, implemented strict anti-migration policies and attacked the independence of the judiciary and the impartiality of the media (Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone, 2018). The normalisation of populist discourse in Italian politics has contributed to public cynicism, eroded party loyalty, and elevated rhetoric over democratic deliberation.

France, while not experiencing institutional backsliding, has seen the rise of right-wing populism that threatens to upend its democratic equilibrium. Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly the National Front) has capitalised on discontent over immigration, European integration, and economic stagnation to push a nationalist-populist agenda. Although Le Pen has lost presidential elections, her rising vote share, especially in the 2022 run-off against Emmanuel Macron, indicates growing public receptiveness to populist messages (Mondon & Winter, 2020). Her platform includes reasserting national sovereignty over EU regulations, restricting immigration, and revising judicial autonomy. While French institutions have so far



resisted these populist pressures, the growing strength of such movements poses a long-term challenge to liberal democracy.

These case studies reveal several shared features of populist-driven democratic backsliding. First, populist leaders often rise to power through legitimate elections and use their mandates to weaken institutional checks, particularly the judiciary and the media. Second, they employ divisive rhetoric to delegitimise opposition and frame political conflict as a battle between the “pure people” and a corrupt elite. Third, they typically centralise executive power, eroding the separation of powers essential for liberal democracy. Importantly, the socio-economic backdrop of populist success cannot be ignored. Economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, and dissatisfaction with globalisation have all contributed to populist appeals. In Hungary and Poland, nationalist populism has thrived by promising social protection and cultural homogeneity. In the United States and Italy, populism drew strength from grievances about immigration, economic decline, and perceived elite betrayal. In France, resentment over globalisation and secular identity has fuelled support for the far right.

### **Populism and Democratic Backsliding in Africa**

Populism and democratic backsliding have emerged as intertwined political dynamics across Africa in the past two decades, reshaping governance in ways that oscillate between popular empowerment and institutional erosion. While populism can invigorate political participation by mobilising previously excluded groups, in many African contexts it has also served as a vehicle for personalist rule, weakening checks and balances, and undermining constitutional safeguards. This pattern mirrors trends in other parts of the Global South, where leaders deploy anti-elite rhetoric and mass appeal to legitimise policies that concentrate power in the executive, erode judicial independence, and constrain media freedoms (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2021).

In **Zimbabwe**, populism became deeply entrenched under Robert Mugabe’s long tenure (1980–2017). Initially celebrated as a liberation hero, Mugabe increasingly framed his rule around anti-colonial populist narratives, positioning himself as the defender of black sovereignty against Western “imperialists.” The land reform programme launched in 2000, which involved the forced seizure of white-owned farms, was justified as rectifying colonial injustices but was also used to reward political allies and punish opponents (Raftopoulos, 2009). These measures mobilised rural support but precipitated an economic collapse, hyperinflation, and international isolation. Elections from 2000 onwards were marked by intimidation, media suppression, and the manipulation of electoral institutions, illustrating how



populist legitimacy claims can coexist with and even accelerate democratic backsliding (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011).

In **Uganda**, President Yoweri Museveni's rule since 1986 demonstrates another variant of populist-authoritarian consolidation. Museveni initially styled himself as a reformist outsider committed to participatory democracy through the "no-party" Movement system. However, over time, his governance shifted towards overt personalism, with populist appeals centred on stability, anti-corruption rhetoric, and development promises. Constitutional amendments in 2005 removed presidential term limits, and in 2017, the age limit was lifted, changes that allowed Museveni to extend his rule indefinitely (Tripp, 2010). State security forces have repeatedly cracked down on opposition movements, most notably against the popular musician-turned-politician Bobi Wine, whose youth-driven campaign in the 2021 elections was met with widespread arrests, internet shutdowns, and lethal force against protesters (HRW, 2021). Here, populism's initial inclusivity transformed into an electoral façade for authoritarian entrenchment.

In **Tanzania**, the presidency of John Magufuli (2015–2021) was marked by a distinctive "developmental populism." Magufuli built a reputation for frugality and anti-corruption, earning the nickname "the Bulldozer" for his decisive infrastructure projects and symbolic acts like cutting lavish government ceremonies (Paget, 2020). While these moves initially boosted public approval, they coincided with growing restrictions on the press, opposition politics, and civil society. Laws such as the Media Services Act (2016) and Cybercrimes Act (2015) were weaponised against dissenting voices, and opposition rallies were effectively banned from 2016 onwards. Magufuli's populist appeal, framed as being "for the people" against corrupt elites, thus provided cover for the shrinking of democratic space and the suppression of pluralism (Nyaluke & Connolly, 2013).

**Ethiopia** under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed offers a more recent and complex example. Coming to power in 2018, Abiy was initially hailed as a transformative populist reformer, releasing political prisoners, liberalising the media, and brokering peace with Eritrea, actions that earned him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. His rhetoric of unity and reform energised Ethiopia's ethnically diverse society and diaspora (Abbink, 2019). However, escalating ethnic tensions, the postponement of the 2020 elections under the guise of COVID-19 measures, and the outbreak of the Tigray conflict in November 2020 marked a sharp authoritarian turn. Reports by Amnesty International (2021) and Human Rights Watch (2021) documented mass atrocities and severe restrictions on press freedom. Abiy's populist vision of national unity thus



devolved into militarised centralisation, undermining democratic decentralisation embedded in Ethiopia's federal constitution.

In **Senegal**, President Macky Sall's tenure since 2012 illustrates how even relatively stable democracies are not immune to populist-driven democratic erosion. Sall's initial campaign positioned him as a corrective to the excesses of his predecessor, Abdoulaye Wade, and he implemented some governance reforms early on. However, his subsequent moves, including controversial constitutional amendments, the prosecution and disqualification of key opposition figures like Khalifa Sall and Ousmane Sonko, and the violent repression of 2021 and 2023 protests, have drawn accusations of authoritarian drift (Niang, 2023). These developments underscore how leaders can use populist reformist credentials to consolidate power, suppress rivals, and weaken competitive politics under the guise of law and order.

Across these cases, several mechanisms connect populism to democratic backsliding in African states outside Nigeria. First, **constitutional manipulation** seen in Uganda's term and age limit removals, Zimbabwe's electoral engineering, and Senegal's controversial amendments enables leaders to extend their tenure beyond democratic norms. Second, **securitized governance** allows executives to frame dissent as a threat to stability, justifying repression in Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Ethiopia. Third, **control over information** through media restrictions, internet shutdowns, and propaganda narratives reinforces the ruling elite's populist image while silencing critics. Finally, **patronage and resource distribution**, as in Zimbabwe's land seizures or Tanzania's infrastructure prioritisation, maintain popular support even as institutional independence erodes.

Thus, while populism in Africa often begins as a democratic corrective challenging entrenched elites and mobilising excluded constituencies, it frequently transitions into a tool for concentrating power. The trajectory of these regimes suggests that without strong institutional guardrails, populism risks becoming a catalyst for authoritarianism. Strengthening independent judiciaries, ensuring electoral integrity, and protecting civil liberties remain essential if populist energy is to be channelled toward democratic renewal rather than regression.

Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has been widely regarded as a key democratic experiment in Africa. Emerging from decades of military dictatorship, the Fourth Republic promised regular elections, constitutional governance, and the consolidation of civil liberties. Yet, between 1999 and 2025, Nigeria's democratic journey has been shaped by recurring populist currents both in opposition and in government that have mobilised mass support while often undermining institutional safeguards. This tension between popular



mobilisation and institutional fragility has fuelled cycles of democratic backsliding in ways that reflect broader African trends. The early years of the Fourth Republic under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) demonstrated how populist rhetoric could be paired with centralising governance. Obasanjo presented himself as a reformer ready to confront corruption and inefficiency, launching anti-graft agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). While these moves enjoyed popular support, critics noted the selective use of anti-corruption prosecutions against political opponents, which suggested a blending of populist anti-elite narratives with political instrumentalisation of institutions (Suberu, 2007). Obasanjo's failed 2006 "Third Term" bid also reflected an authoritarian temptation embedded within strong personalist leadership styles.

Under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010), the tone shifted towards institutional reform, but his short tenure limited impact. His 2007 election was widely criticised for irregularities, yet Yar'Adua publicly admitted flaws in the process and initiated electoral reforms, a rare instance of a Nigerian president using populist humility to strengthen, rather than weaken, institutions (Aiyede, 2014). His successor, Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015), rose to prominence on a populist appeal as a man of humble origins from the Niger Delta, promising inclusive governance. Initially buoyed by public sympathy, his administration's credibility suffered during the fuel subsidy removal crisis of January 2012, when nationwide protests ("Occupy Nigeria") erupted over rising living costs (Adesote & Abimbola, 2014). The government's securitised crackdown on demonstrators revealed a growing pattern in which populist leaders, faced with mass dissent, resorted to repressive measures that weakened civil liberties.

The 2015 general elections marked a watershed moment: for the first time, an incumbent president was defeated at the polls, with Muhammadu Buhari defeating Goodluck Jonathan. Buhari's campaign employed classic populist tropes, portraying himself as a frugal, incorruptible outsider who would cleanse Nigeria's political system (Cheeseman et al., 2019). In office (2015–2023), Buhari pursued anti-corruption and anti-terrorism agendas with strong public support, but his administration was accused of deepening executive dominance over the judiciary, security agencies, and the media (Freedom House, 2022). High-profile arrests of journalists, bans on Twitter in 2021, and the prolonged detention of critics like Omoyele Sowore illustrated the narrowing of civic space (Amnesty International, 2021). Meanwhile, opposition parties accused Buhari of selective anti-corruption enforcement and of tolerating, if not encouraging, mass defections from opposition ranks into the ruling All Progressives



Congress (APC), eroding the competitiveness of Nigeria's party system. Economic crises and insecurity intensified populist appeals during Buhari's tenure. The recession of 2016, persistent fuel scarcity, and worsening insecurity from Boko Haram insurgency to banditry created fertile ground for political actors to offer sweeping, personality-driven solutions. Yet, instead of fostering structural reform, these pressures often justified extraordinary security measures that sidelined institutional checks.

The 2023 general elections ushered in Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president, amid one of Nigeria's most competitive and contested electoral environments since 1999. Tinubu's "Emi Lokan" ("It's my turn") campaign blended elite bargaining with populist mobilisation, promising decisive action on the economy and security (Reuters, 2023a). Opposition leaders Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi challenged the results in court, citing irregularities and technological failures in INEC's result transmission. Although the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal and the Supreme Court upheld Tinubu's win (Reuters, 2023b), the drawn-out litigation deepened public scepticism about the integrity of elections, with segments of the population viewing the judiciary as politically aligned.

Tinubu's early economic reforms, particularly the removal of fuel subsidies and currency liberalisation, triggered unprecedented cost-of-living increases. By mid-2024, inflation and transport costs had skyrocketed, prompting the "#10DaysOfRage" protests. Amnesty International (2024) and Reuters (2024a) reported security forces' use of excessive force, including live ammunition, against demonstrators. These events echoed the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests, suggesting a cyclical pattern in which economic grievances fuel mass mobilisation, only for state responses to erode civil liberties further. In 2024–2025, security crises in the Niger Delta and political violence in Rivers State prompted the federal government to impose emergency measures and appoint interim administrators (Financial Times, 2024a). Critics argued that such interventions blurred the line between legitimate crisis response and political manoeuvring to weaken opposition-controlled subnational governments. The precedent of using security emergencies to centralise federal authority risks undermining Nigeria's federal structure and democratic decentralisation.

Across this 26-year span, several mechanisms have linked populism to democratic backsliding in Nigeria. First, contested elections from 2007 to 2023 have been exploited by leaders to claim extraordinary mandates or by opposition actors to delegitimise institutions. Second, elite consolidation through party defections, especially into the ruling party, has eroded political pluralism (Premium Times, 2024). Third, economic crises have been instrumentalised to justify securitised governance, from Jonathan's 2012 protests to Tinubu's 2024



demonstrations. Fourth, security emergencies have provided cover for centralising power at the expense of subnational autonomy. Nevertheless, Nigeria's democracy has not collapsed into outright authoritarianism. Civil society, a pluralistic media (despite pressures), and active public protest movements have repeatedly pushed back against excesses. Freedom House (2025) continues to categorise Nigeria as "Partly Free," reflecting both the resilience and fragility of its democratic institutions. The trajectory towards 2025 suggests that without significant institutional reforms, including greater electoral transparency, limits on emergency powers, and stronger protections for civil liberties, Nigeria risks deepening its cycle of populist mobilisation followed by institutional erosion.

Ultimately, Nigeria's experience from 1999 to 2025 mirrors broader African patterns in which populism serves as both a vehicle for political renewal and a conduit for democratic regression. The determining factor lies not in populism itself, but in the strength of the institutions tasked with channelling popular will into accountable governance. Without reinforcing those guardrails, the appeal of populist shortcuts will continue to tempt leaders, and each cycle of backsliding will leave Nigeria's democratic experiment weaker than before. Populism has emerged as a defining force in contemporary politics, often accompanying democratic backsliding, the gradual erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and values. While populist movements frequently originate from genuine grievances such as economic inequality, institutional corruption, and political alienation, their approaches often challenge constitutional order and weaken democratic safeguards. Addressing populism and reversing democratic decline, therefore, requires comprehensive strategies that strengthen institutions, promote civic literacy, foster inclusivity, and rebuild public trust in governance.

A key strategy is the strengthening of democratic institutions, particularly the judiciary. Independent courts serve as critical guardians of democracy by ensuring that political leaders remain accountable to constitutional principles. As Prendergast (2019) explains, drawing on John Hart Ely's democratic theory, the judiciary's role is not to perfect democracy but to protect its procedural foundations from majoritarian excesses that threaten rights and checks and balances. However, judicial independence must be complemented by public confidence. The CEELI Institute and JSCA (2020) emphasise that transparency, civic education, and clear communication are essential for maintaining trust in the judiciary. Public engagement enhances legitimacy and insulates courts from populist attacks that seek to delegitimise judicial neutrality.

Equally vital is promoting media literacy and civic education. Populist movements often exploit misinformation, emotional rhetoric, and echo chambers to manipulate public



opinion. Strengthening media literacy empowers citizens to identify bias and resist disinformation. Lord and Vogt (2021) observe that individuals with higher media literacy are less vulnerable to populist manipulation, while Popescu (2022) and Tomšič (2023) highlight that critical thinking skills foster resilience against simplistic narratives. Incorporating media analysis into education systems cultivates an informed electorate capable of defending democratic discourse against demagoguery and propaganda.

Economic and social reforms also form a cornerstone of any effective counter populist agenda. Populism thrives in contexts of economic hardship, inequality, and social exclusion. Governments must therefore implement policies that reduce disparities and promote fairness. Progressive taxation, equitable wage systems, and expanded social welfare programs can reduce economic anxiety and restore confidence in democratic governance. Hicklin Coorey (2022) argues that progressive tax reforms curb excessive wealth concentration, while Behar (2023) notes that investment in healthcare, education, and housing strengthens social cohesion. By ensuring inclusive economic growth and sustainable employment, states can undercut the appeal of populist leaders who exploit inequality and insecurity.

Inclusive governance is another essential response to populist polarisation. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012), populism often relies on a moral dichotomy between a “pure people” and a “corrupt elite,” which fosters intolerance and scapegoating. Governments can counter this divisive logic by promoting pluralism, protecting minority rights, and ensuring diverse representation in decision-making. Engaging marginalised communities in political processes and adopting inclusive policy frameworks can reduce feelings of exclusion and mitigate the resentment that fuels populist support.

Political party reform is also crucial in renewing public trust in representative democracy. Many mainstream parties have become bureaucratic and detached, creating openings for populist challengers. Vitale and Girard (2022) suggest that political parties must prioritise transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with citizens. By offering clear, evidence-based policies and acknowledging governance shortcomings, parties can rebuild credibility and demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns. Revitalised party systems thus serve as an essential democratic buffer against populist disruption.

Finally, mobilising civil society is indispensable in defending democratic resilience. Civil society organisations (CSOs) promote political literacy, foster civic engagement, and hold governments accountable. Tamang (2024) notes that CSOs strengthen democracy by empowering citizens to participate actively and responsibly, while Cossarini (2021) argues that they can reframe political discourse to emphasise cooperation rather than division. Through



advocacy, monitoring, and public education, civil society functions as both a watchdog and a bridge between citizens and institutions, counteracting the polarisation and mistrust upon which populism thrives.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

Populism and democratic backsliding have emerged as interlinked phenomena that challenge the foundations of democracy worldwide. Fuelled by socio-economic grievances, cultural anxieties, and declining trust in institutions, populist movements often exploit democratic processes to consolidate executive dominance, weaken checks and balances, and marginalise opposition. This trajectory can lead to the erosion of civil liberties, press freedom, minority rights, and judicial independence under the guise of majoritarian legitimacy. To mitigate these threats, responses must be comprehensive: strengthening democratic institutions, reinforcing judicial independence, expanding civic education, addressing socio-economic inequality, reforming political parties, and mobilising civil society. Ultimately, safeguarding democracy requires not only institutional reforms but also the revitalisation of public trust and civic engagement to resist the corrosive effects of authoritarian drift cloaked in populist rhetoric.

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