

Populism in Southern Africa under liberation movements as governments

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Summary

Anti-colonial movements secured political power as governments in countries of Southern Africa. Populist discourses, which reinforce the patriotic history and heroic narratives of a 'big men' syndrome, are part of their political culture retaining continued legitimacy, not least in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where national sovereignty was the result of a negotiated transfer of political power. This briefing presents a critical assessment of such populism as an integral part of the repertoire of former liberation movements as governments.

Introduction

Populism in politics is not a new invention. It exists in a variety of historical settings and societies as well as ideological connotations almost everywhere. Beyond its particular substantive contents (if there are any), populism operates with a specific kind of rhetoric, addressing in a simple and direct way 'the people'. It creates the impression that it is they that matter, that they count more than access to political power by those acting in a populist mode. Populist forms of mobilisation take advantage of the understanding and practice of liberal democracy while being in their core utterly illiberal. There is a broad disparity between the propagated and claimed ideal and the reality, or between promises and deliveries (cf. Canovan 1981 and 1999). At a closer look, populists care about their own interests, not those of the people and wider society.

In South Africa, like elsewhere, current populist discourses are criticised as being anything but constructive in meeting the challenges and solving the problems (Dikeni 2017, 20). Notwithstanding such diagnosis, these discourses are an important element and ingredient in reproducing the continued influence of those maintaining political power. They are at times tailor-made messages to a wider audience revoking identification with the struggle narrative as well as utilising and mobilising sentiments deeply rooted in the settler-traumatic history and anything but aberrant forms of policy making: 'Populism, understood as an appeal to "the people" ... should not be dismissed as a pathological form of politics of no interest to the political theorist' (Canovan 1999, 2). While also liberation movements as government need more than only a populist rhetoric, such appeals have been an integral part of their governance skills and techniques beyond the person

articulating them. This article seeks to illustrate the forms and meaning of such feature of post-settler-colonial narratives.

Liberation movements as populist governments

Former liberation movements in Southern Africa, who as a result of their anti-colonial resistance finally replaced white minority rule by seizing political control, are indeed rather succinct examples of utilising a specific form of populism, although outside of the mainstream efforts in academia focusing on and analysing populism. The common engagement with populism tends to focus on the context of established democracies, in which populists mobilise against an establishment and appeal to sentiments suspicious of those democrats in government, rallying 'against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (Canovan 1999, 3). The common assumption is that they are 'of the people but not of the system' (Taggart 1996, 32). This form of attack on established systems is not the point of departure for the kind of populism we are witnessing in Southern Africa. Rather, populism is a means to legitimise the continued governance of former liberation movements by appealing to the continued struggle against foreign domination and thereby marketing oneself as the only true alternative and promise of a better future. It is a kind of retrospectively applied populism vis-à-vis a colonial dominance left behind but accused of seeking to regain power. It is reclaiming ownership over history and society not by seeking but by remaining in power.

In more recent theoretical explorations of forms of democracy resembling features of a one-party dominance, such systems were classified as 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010a). As the authors coining the term argue:

The most durable party-based regimes are those that are organized around non-material sources of cohesion, such as ideology, ethnicity, or bonds of solidarity rooted in a shared experience of violent struggle. In particular, parties whose origins lie in war, violent anti-colonial struggle, revolution, or counter-insurgency are more likely to survive economic crisis, leadership succession, and opposition challenges without suffering debilitating effects. (Levitsky and Way 2010b, 3)

And as they conclude: 'Revolutionary or liberation struggles also tend to produce a generation of leaders ... that possesses the necessary legitimacy to impose discipline during crises.' Hence, 'new ruling parties that emerged from violent struggle, such as SWAPO in Namibia, ... appear to be more durable' (Levitsky and Way 2010b, 44 and 45).

Heroic-patriotic narratives designed for the nation building in former settler societies fell on fertile soil among the formerly colonised. The official discourses introduced were accompanied by the belief that the seizure of political power translates into a kind of 'the end of history': as from now on, there cannot exist any legitimate alternative to the liberation movements as governments, and changes in political control over the respective countries can only happen legitimately within those movements turned parties.

The right to self-determination by means of an at least formal democratic political system was among others achieved by the armed struggle as a contributing factor. The militant resistance and its sacrifices to overthrow white minority rule were combined with a promise for a better future. But the socio-political (much more than economic)

transfer of power and subsequent transformation was limited to handing over administration and governance to the erstwhile liberation movement. Such negotiated transition, far from being fundamental socio-economic transformation, did not abandon or decisively reduce the structurally anchored discrepancies of a society based on institutionalised inequality. Instead, a new elite secured through its access to the commanding heights of the state for itself a similar status to those who under the old system were the privileged few, while large parts of the population remained marginalised also under the new governments. Beyond the formal civic rights for political participation anchored in a constitution, such systems showed the narrow limits to liberation.

Old men for eternity? The case of Mugabe

In contrast to such realities, which could be dubbed an elite pact, a compensatory narrative claimed that any form of injustice is rooted in the colonial past, while the new regime tries everything possible to improve the living conditions of the people. But at a closer look, the old slogan of *a luta continua* had simply changed into ‘the looting continues’. Once the people observe this betrayal, reminiscences of the old forms of oppression and domination by a minority regime are reactivated to declare the remnants of this past to be the sole culprits for the experienced shortcomings. When the Mugabe regime at the turn of the century lost support among the majority of people, it declared the white commercial farmers to be the root cause of all evil and initiated the ‘fast-track’ land reform – without regaining the support of most Zimbabweans. After all, it remained not unnoticed that the main beneficiaries of the land redistribution were members of the new elite’s political–military complex.

Despite the fact that Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) could only because of massive repression and the support of the other liberation movements in government within the Southern African Development Community region maintain power to finally regain dominance, the image and claim of being the eternal liberator continued to impregnate the interpretations and perceptions of the history and presence. Those promoting such imaginations can rely on stereotypes that – while bordering on mystifications and mythologies – can still be activated among parts of the population. This context

builds Mugabe into an abstract idea – the very embodiment of anti-colonial spirit. In this way, an attack on a Mugabe decision becomes not just an attack on him, but on the entire idea that black people deserve the right to self-determination. (Mpfu-Walsh 2017, 96)

That Mugabe, despite his well-known track record and its devastating consequences for the health system of Zimbabwe, could at the end of October 2017 be appointed by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) and former Ethiopian Minister of Health, as a WHO ‘goodwill ambassador’ provoked worldwide protest, and the WHO Director had to withdraw the appointment the following day. But it documented the tenacious survival and cultivation of the status as heroes among the old men of the liberation struggle days. At the same time, such an extraordinary example underlines that ‘populism is not just a reaction *against* power structures but an appeal *to* a recognized authority’, which illustrates ‘the tendency for heightened emotions to be focused on a charismatic leader’ (Canovan 1999, 4 and 6, original emphasis).

The 93-year old Robert Mugabe could without any embarrassment publicly declare that he would never make room for a political opposition party by categorically stating that the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) would never be allowed to govern the country and that only God, who has appointed him, could remove him from office (Marx 2017, 245). As president by God's will, Mugabe felt not accountable to the people. His wife Grace could on several occasions suggest in all seriousness that her husband could also continue to reign from his grave (Jirihanga 2017). Such a phenomenon of African gerontocracies underlines that populism is effective and appealing to a wider audience. But beyond its outreach to 'ordinary people', it is based on a group of compliant beneficiaries within the inner circle of state power. A profile of Mugabe therefore concludes that the really interesting phenomenon is not a man who stubbornly and ruthlessly accesses power, but the political culture which produces such a dictator (Marx 2017, 261).

That there are nevertheless limits to such rule showed the military intervention in Zimbabwean politics in mid November 2017. But the 'corrective measure', replacing Mugabe with 75-year old Emmerson Mnangagwa (aptly dubbed 'the crocodile'), his former confidante and another from the first struggle generation, simply prevented Mugabe's wife from continuing a dynasty which would have shifted the control to outside ZANU-PF's established centre of power, into the hands of some aspiring 'newcomers' with no struggle merits. The aura of Mugabe, despite the countrywide celebrations of his ousting among those who had suffered under his reign, remained largely untouched. He retained recognition as 'Leader Maximum', including the introduction of his birthday as a national holiday.

Populism made in Namibia

The 'big men' syndrome is an integral element of a populism made in Southern Africa. Its impact continues to be inextricably linked with the history of the anti-colonial resistance, whose mystification remains until the present a central political element. Sam Nujoma (born 1929), who was president of the SWAPO political party from its founding in 1960 until 2007, and the first head of state of Namibia from independence in 1990 until 2005, was awarded the official title 'Father of the Namibian Nation' by the National Assembly at the end of his three terms in office. His biography (Nujoma 2001) was published under the programmatic title *Where others wavered* and underlined the claim of uncompromising steadfastness.

Far from retiring (a liberation fighter never retires), Nujoma presented in 2010 the opening address to the party's Youth League and ended his speech with the appeal:

As Namibian youth, and as Africans, you must therefore be on the full alert and remain vigilant against deceptive attempts by opportunists and unpatriotic elements that attempt to divide you. As the future leaders of our country, you should act with dedication and commitment; to always promote the interests of the SWAPO Party and the national interests before your own. It is only through that manner that the SWAPO Party will grow from strength to strength and continues to rule Namibia for the next ONE THOUSAND YEARS. (Nujoma n.d., capital letters in the original)

Ignorant about notoriously burnt historic platitudes and removed from social realities, such anachronistically minded 'chiefs' can further act in their phantasy world. Politics

have also in the post-Nujoma era remained the domain of aging men. Three of them (76, 74 and 70 years of age) competed at the SWAPO Party Congress in November 2017 for presidency. The elected 76-year old current head of state Hage Geingob will be the almost certain party candidate for the country's next presidential elections in late 2019 and secure a second term in office for 2020 to 2025. If the official retirement age of 60 years for Namibia's public service were to be applied with immediate effect to the party's Political Bureau and its Central Committee, these organs would have markedly fewer members (Melber, Kromrey and Welz 2017).

Hage Geingob might be the last to hold office from the first generation of the liberation struggle, politically active since the early 1960s. He was elected with 86% of the votes in the presidential elections of November 2014. Digressing from his predecessors Sam Nujoma and Hifikepunye Pohamba, Geingob replaced the image of SWAPO as the family, home and nation, invoking a wider formula beyond the party. In his first State of the Nation address in April 2015, he introduced the powerful metaphor of 'the Namibian house', which according to him provides room for all Namibians. However, the question of who is where and how accommodated in the Namibian house remained unanswered: who occupies the best rooms, who cooks, who washes dishes and takes care of the laundry and cleaning?

Geingob also tabled the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP). Announced in April 2016, it is based on an anticipated annual economic growth rate of 7%. At that time Angola's oil economy was already a shambles, and South Africa on its rapid decline towards rock bottom. One of Namibia's worst droughts was ravaging the country and the government's overexpenditure, accelerated by the expansion of the higher echelons of political administration under Geingob, had drained the state coffers. Such a growth rate, therefore, was at best wishful thinking. Instead, Namibia recorded in 2017, for the second year, a 'technical' recession (another euphemism). A survey conducted by the United Nations in 2016 showed that 37% of the population was malnourished and 24% of all children below the age of five were stunted (Cloete 2017). Blame for the miserable performance, however, was put only on external factors. Populists are never responsible for failures. Only others are, and circumstances beyond their control. But populism is creative: the continued high international ranking in terms of media freedom was declared an achievement of the HPP. Populists seemingly also count on memory loss. After all, Namibia had the freest media in Africa already before the current president moved into office, when the HPP was not even a twinkle in his eyes.

As not only Namibia shows, caution is required when populism makes promises and refers to a future that is more wishful thinking than based on realistic assumptions. Not that any ordinary politician elsewhere too would shy away from similar promises. It is part of their fabric. But populists seemingly tend to be even more generous with their claims and invite even closer inspection, seeking to establish that from which they want to distract.

South African populism

Those gradually losing support and trust through 'bad governance' since moving into office are often resorting to conspiracy theories in their desperate efforts not to surrender. They dismiss and ridicule almost every form of meaningful opposition even within their

own ranks, as the power struggles inside the African National Congress (ANC) documented. Accusations often suggest that opponents are remote-controlled agents of imperialism seeking regime change as instruments of foreign agendas. When increasingly under pressure, Jacob Zuma even blamed ‘witches’ inside the ANC as being responsible for efforts to remove him from office (Politicsweb 2016). In the footsteps of Robert Mugabe and Sam Nujoma, he also declared categorically that the ANC rules forever (*Mail & Guardian* 2014) and repeatedly stated that the ANC would govern until the return of Jesus (Ngoepe 2016).

When Zuma in August 2017 survived the ninth motion of non-confidence in his political career he reacted by singing songs from the liberation struggle. This is a popular ritual to maintain the impression that the liberators are holding out in office. Such symbolism seeks to document solidarity with the masses and to confirm the belief that the political leadership made sacrifices not only during the days of the struggle, but that it relentlessly and selflessly continues to engage for a better future of the people. Zuma also appealed to primordial identities of a ‘Zulu warrior culture’: at rallies he frequently intoned the struggle song ‘Bring me my machine gun’ – at a time when he was in court accused of rape.

Through mobilisation by such means, the new elite resorts to a popular and populist element: it creates the impression of a patriotic commitment, which seeks to cover its failures. At the same time it generates a timeline in which the protagonists feature as members of a struggle aristocracy. As a social movement activist diagnosed: ‘They want us to believe that the struggle is over, that all we have is remnants of the old order against whom our anger should be vented.’ This is intended to distract from the injustices and inequalities under those governing now, acting in complicity: ‘the kleptomaniac proclivities of the new political and economic elite, the advent of the black colonialists, attacks on the freedom of media, the massive acts of de-politicisation’ are systematic efforts to distract from the struggle for true emancipation (wa Bofelo 2010).

Part of the rescue effort by the Zuma team was the attempt to pose as vanguard against ‘white monopoly capital’ in a situation where the South African economy through large-scale corruption, embezzlement, nepotism and criminal networks among those in control over state agencies had established a predatory system which even monopoly capitalism would not find opportune. Such state capture was based on a systematic looting of the state assets and coffers. While research disclosed a degree of organised crime inside the state beyond imagination (Bhorat et al. 2017; Pauw 2017), the ‘race card’ mobilised internalised emotional resentments to all associated with the settler-colonial past, aimed at discrediting competitors as sell-outs.

Such efforts seeking distraction from the acute socio-economic crisis drew a distinction between the ‘real people’ and its enemies – a foreign or fifth column, against which they claim a need to stand together. By doing so, they try to make use of a deeply entrenched, shared historic experience (Simkins 2017, 36). This is a most risky populist game:

Calling on one’s supporters to ‘remain vigilant of certain sections of our population who were the beneficiaries of the old order and are bent to either reversing this achievement or at best stall the progress’ – as the ANC did on Freedom Day this year – is disturbing to say the least. ‘Ours is to confront those elements intent on undermining the popular electoral mandate in order to reverse the gains of our hard-won democracy’, continued the ANC statement. Advice of this kind should come with a cautionary warning: to define a section of the population in these terms can have disastrous consequences. (Shain 2017, 9)

Changing populism

As the ultimate fall of Zuma documented, such populism has its limits. It underlines that populism alone is not enough. The anti-colonial movement as a party and government does not speak with one voice and has to observe the impact of governance on the electorate to remain in power. This requires other forms of policy too and at times motivates also the replacement of populists who put the bigger interest beyond their personal gains at risk. Resentments among the population against such forms of cloaking the abuse of power had been growing to an extent, which made the Zuma presidency untenable. The continued recourse to the merits obtained during the liberation struggle in particular was increasingly critically commented upon among the generation of the 'born frees'. The appeals to remain loyal to the liberators lost their relevance. Together with the struggle old-timers, the heroic narrative approached an expiry date and is dismissed as a self-serving invention:

No leader – and no party – deserves a 'get out of jail free' card because of an intellectually shaky myth. To question that 'the ANC liberated us' is not only a matter of historical accuracy, it's also a necessary, subversive political act, in a present crying out for historiographical honesty. (Mpofu-Walsh 2017, 95)

This, however, does not signal an end to populism, which is also personified in Julius Malema of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Part of his success might be that as a younger edition of Jacob Zuma he does not stand in his former master's tradition and therefore represents the future – even if such a future does not necessarily bode well. As observed by Ismael Lagardien (2018), social conditions in South Africa are a 'fertile ground for fascist demagoguery and appeal'. But the emerging discourses indicate a shift: torchbearers of hope are no longer the aging veterans of the struggle days and their mindset. Zuma contributed to Malema's popularity by dismissing him from his own insider circle, thereby turning him into an alternative competing in terms of radical populism, while Zuma is increasingly seen as an obstacle to progress. Much as he tried, he could no longer reinvent himself as a man of the people. As already predicted more than a year before his downfall:

It is too late for a comeback, particularly on the back of a populist wave. Zuma now has to make way while bigger and more powerful populists rise, and they might prove to be even more dangerous than he is. (Munusamy 2016)

Cyril Ramaphosa as new president of the party and the state seems to be a replacement that allows political credibility to be regained among ordinary voters. Perceived as a technocrat, the former trade union activist, who amassed an estimated fortune of US\$450 million mainly through his involvement in mining companies, is not free of populist tendencies either. Widely hailed as 'the New Messiah of the Holy Republic of South Africa' (Poplak 2018), the enthusiasm was – similar to the jubilation in Zimbabwe over the replacement of Mugabe – more an indication of the relief over getting rid of the previous office holder. His 'surface imagery' resembles – albeit different – populist features too, when initiating early morning walks surrounded by common people who celebrate him as the saviour; although the choice of the posh Cape Town Sea Point promenade might not have been the best first choice to portray himself as a man of the people (Davis 2018).

Despite the differences in perspective, such a shift nevertheless testifies to another feature inherent to liberation movements as governments. These retain a movement character and ‘often have more or less charismatic leaders, vivid individuals who can make politics personal and immediate instead of being remote and bureaucratic’ (Canovan 1999, 14). They are a side of democracy that we have to accept and deal with. After all, as pointed out, liberal democracy has also to live with its illiberal forms:

the two faces of democracy are a pair of squabbling Siamese twins, inescapably linked, so that it is an illusion to suppose that we can have one without the other. But the tensions between them are very great, and it is these tensions ... which provide the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow. (Canovan 1999, 10)

Let us hope that institutions established for democratic checks and balances, such as an independent judiciary and other agencies of state supposed to act in the public interest and not that of political parties or populist demagogues, as well as the watchdog function of media and the role of civil society agencies, social movements and indeed also scholars, will never be overshadowed and coerced or silenced by the undemocratic forms of populism.

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