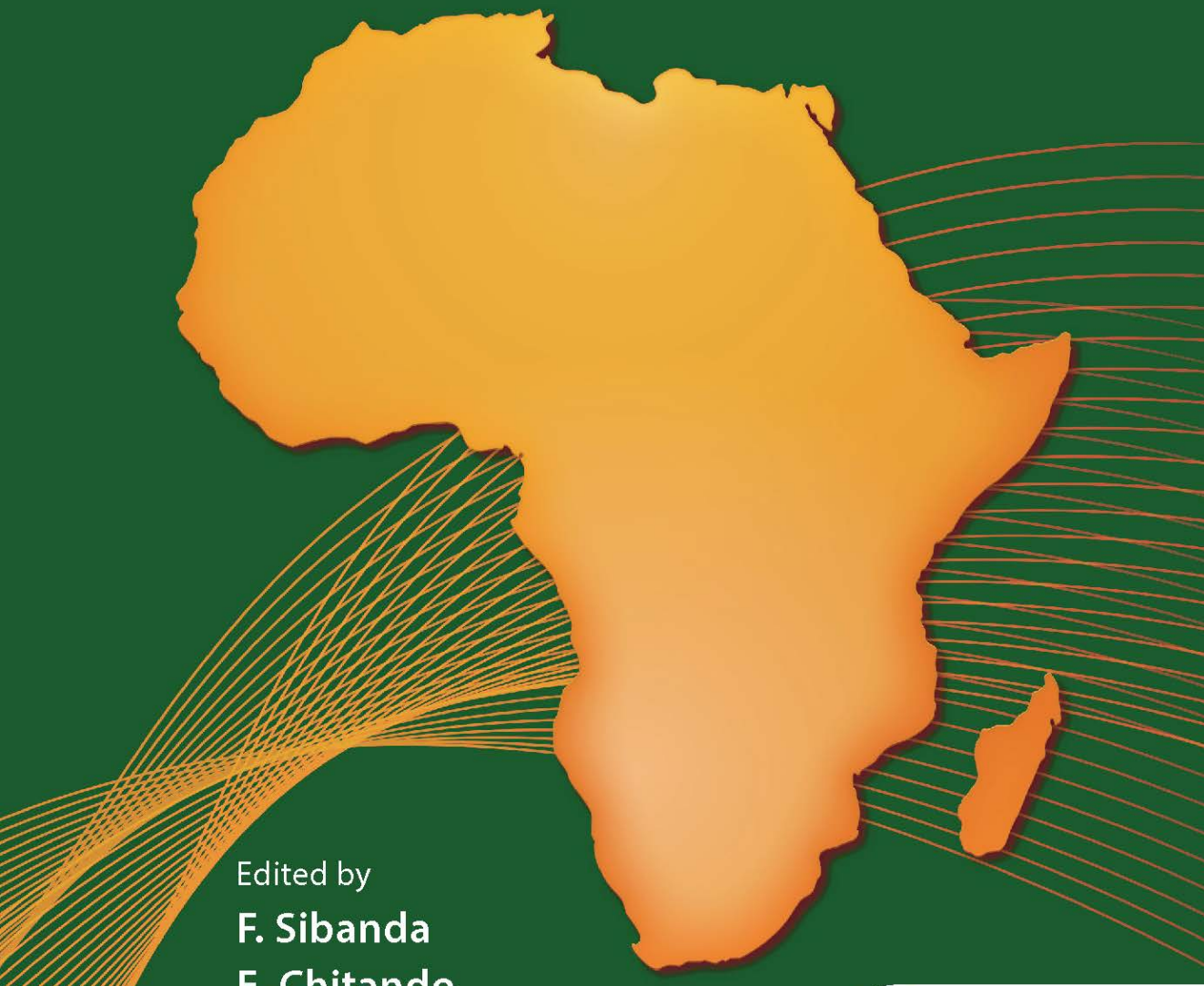
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5 Populist authoritarianism, democracy and alternative leadership deficiency theory in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of democracy and authoritarianism represent two distinct forms of governance that have profoundly shaped political landscapes worldwide. Democracy, often hailed as a system of governance that champions citizen participation, individual rights and the rule of law, stands in contrast to authoritarianism, which concentrates power in the hands of a single leader or a small elite, curtails civil liberties and typically lacks meaningful political pluralism.[2] These concepts reflect fundamental differences in how political authority is exercised, the role of citizens in decision-making, and the protection of human rights, and they continue to be central to discussions on governance, human rights, and global politics.

Authoritarianism refers to a political system where power and leadership are centralised in a single leader or a small elite, with oligarchic regimes or a ruling party. It is often characterised by the curtailment of freedom of expression and assembly, persecution of political opponents and dissidents, manipulation of electoral processes, media control, use of violence and intimidation, corruption and nepotism, and the limitation of checks and balances, curtailing individual rights and freedoms.[3] Authoritarian regimes are also characterised by weak institutions, such as the judiciary and the legislature, that allow the authoritarian leader or elite to exercise power without constraint.[4] According to political psychologist Danny Osborne and colleagues, authoritarianism is a worldview marked by a belief in group superiority, a desire for conformity and a rejection of pluralism and dissent.[5] This perspective sees the world as dangerous and unpredictable, advocating for strong leadership and strict social order to ensure stability and security. Suspicion

1 Senior Lecturer and Former Dean, Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations (HIPSIR), Hekima University College; Director, Centre for Research, Training and Publications (CRTP), Hekima University College

2 Puddington A. 2017 "Breaking Down Democracy: Goals Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians", Freedom House.org (Washington, DC: Freedom House).

3 Glasius M. 2018. "What authoritarianism is… and is not: a practice perspective", *International Affairs* 94(3):515-533.

4 Art D. 2012. "What do we know about authoritarianism after ten years?" *Comparative Politics* 44(3):351-373.

5 Osborne D, Costello TH, Duckitt J and Sibley CG. 2023. "The psychological causes and societal consequences of authoritarianism", *Nature Reviews Psychology* 2(4):220-232.

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of outsiders and challengers to the status quo is prevalent among autocratic societies. The key attributes of this worldview as highlighted by Danny Osborne and colleagues include a natural societal hierarchy that emphasises conformity and obedience, rejection of dissent and a fear of instability, all underlining the need for stringent leadership and social order to maintain security.[6]

Authoritarian tendencies are not only compatible with but are inherent to liberal democracies. In liberal democracies, authoritarian measures are exhibited through the coercive or arbitrary exercise of power with minimal respect for individual rights or freedoms.[7] On the other hand, international relations scholar Marlies Glasius contends that authoritarianism is not merely the absence of democracy but comprises distinct practices present in various contexts, including democracies which are employed to stifle dissent, curtail civil liberties and centralise power among a select few.[8]

Authoritarianism takes varied forms that range from traditional and historical to modern forms. Distinctions in new authoritarian regimes exist. Unlike their traditional counterparts, these new authoritarians typically prioritise internal power and stability over ideological ambitions to transform other nations exporting their political models.[9] They also tend to be more integrated into the global economic order and may allow limited political participation, including elections and some freedom of speech.[10] According to Glasius, there are three critical features of authoritarian practices. Firstly, these practices are deliberate and systematic, indicating that authoritarian actors actively seek to establish and sustain power structures that serve their interests and those of their allies. Secondly, such practices pervade all aspects of government and society, ranging from election procedures to media regulations, with a significant degree of interconnection, as one authoritarian practice can reinforce others. Lastly, authoritarian practices exhibit adaptability and evolution, with actors continually learning and adjusting their strategies, while leveraging new technologies and opportunities to expand their influence.[11]

This chapter introduces the theory of Alternative Leadership Deficiency (ALD), which I devised to explain the persistence of authoritarian practices and state capture in African political contexts. The ALD theory outlines four pillars of state capture—political, economic, military, and citizenry control—demonstrating how authoritarian leaders consolidate power, manipulate institutions, and erode governance structures. It situates these challenges within the broader crisis of democracy in Africa, marked by weakened institutions, constitutional coups, and

6 Glasius M. 2023. *Authoritarian Practices in a Global Age.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

7 Kennedy D. 2019. "Authoritarian constitutionalism in liberal democracies", in Alviar García H and Frankenberg G (eds) *Authoritarian Constitutionalism: Comparative Analysis and Critique.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 161-184.

8 Kennedy, "Authoritarian constitutionalism in liberal democracies".

9 Krastev I. 2011. "Paradoxes of the new authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy* 22(2):5.

10 Krastev, "Paradoxes of the new authoritarianism", 5.

11 Krastev, "Paradoxes of the new authoritarianism", 5.

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voter disenfranchisement. While focusing on examples mostly from African states and through an analysis of populist rhetoric, electoral distrust, military coups, and clientelism, the chapter emphasises the interplay of psychological, social and institutional dynamics that sustain authoritarianism and explores its impact on governance, social inclusion and institutional integrity. Finally, the chapter advocates for alternative governance models, including participatory and rotational frameworks, to address Africa's unique socio-political realities and foster resilient, inclusive, and effective democratic systems.

THEORY OF ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP DEFICIENCY

I propose the theory of Alternative Leadership Deficiency (ALD), which I developed to explain the dearth of leadership among political leaders.[12] The ALD theory affirms that populist authoritarian leaders often perpetuate the ideology of absolutism in leadership, considering themselves as the only capable leaders who can govern the country. They surround themselves with political elites that perpetuate their leaders by creating a capture machine that takes over key arms of government. The ALD theory articulates four pillars of state capture: (1) the *capture of political institutions* through the control of political parties, electoral systems, parliament, congress and senate; (2) the *capture of economic structures* through control of all business transactions and economic policies that favour political elites and their cronies; (3) the *capture of military infrastructure* through control of the military appointments, use of law enforcers to intimidate citizens or silence any government opposition; and (4) the *capture of the citizenry* through manipulative false promises, politicisation and polarisation of social identities, and instigation of communal violence along ethnic, religious, racial, national or political identities. This quadro-capture manifests itself differently in each country. In ALD theory, the concept of state capture revolves around the notion that governing is akin to a business transaction, where institutions are expected to yield significant advantages to the political elite.[13] These advantages include economic gains, assurances of security, unwavering loyalty and undisrupted control over leadership longevity.

Social theorists argue that authoritarianism is rooted in a desire to maintain and extend the dominance of one's group over other groups. People who are high in social dominance orientation are more likely to support authoritarian regimes and policies that benefit their own group at the expense of other groups. On a similar note, social psychologist Stefano Passini, has highlighted the importance of social conformity, asserting that authoritarian individuals are more inclined to adhere to societal norms, even when they are detrimental or unjust.[14] According

12 Opongo E. 2024. "When Peace Interventions Become Elusive: The Convoluted Darfur Conflict", *The Journal of Social Encounters* 8(2):69-87.

13 Opongo EO. 2024. "Populist Authoritarianism and Catholic Political Ethics: A Framework for a Moral Review", *Religions* 15(6):660.

14 Passini S. 2017. "Different ways of being authoritarian: The distinct effects of authoritarian dimensions on values and prejudice", *Political Psychology* 38(1):73-86.

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to Passini, authoritarianism emphasises the conflict between the values of social conformity and personal autonomy as the root of authoritarianism. Authoritarians prioritise social conformity, viewing it as essential for societal order and stability, advocating for subordinating personal needs to the collective. They tend to support authoritarian regimes, which they see as best suited to enforce social conformity. Empirical studies have supported social theory, linking high authoritarianism scores to support for policies limiting personal freedoms and authoritarian leaders promising stability.[15] Social theories extend beyond individual traits, highlighting the role of social and cultural influences, as authoritarians are drawn to regimes skilled in enforcing social norms using varied methods such as propaganda, surveillance and repression.[16]

At the core of the populist authoritarianism and crisis of democracy in Africa is the reinforced ALD theory grounded on the problematic colonial inheritance of the violent formation of the African states. Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, notes that these formations were marked by socio-cultural dispossessions, territorial conquests and economic exploitations of the colonised nations.[17] Mahmood Mamdani, a Ugandan political scientist, holds the view that colonialism bolstered the violent bifurcation of people in the captured colonies.[18] Hence, governance by violence became the norm. In his recent book, *Neither Settler nor Native*, Mamdani asserts that analysis of the current political systems of governance in Africa ought to be understood within the frameworks of colonial realities that disrupted the social-cultural systems of many societies.[19] Hence, a decolonial process is imperative for any suggested change in the current governance systems. However, while "lament" on colonial disruption is a valid and acceptable analysis, such "lament" ought to go a step further and explore alternatives to the disruptive systems of governance that became inherited democratic processes in Africa.

In several African countries, state capture has been characterised by securitisation of democracy, populist authoritarianism and politicisation of ethnic identities. These have resulted in coup d'états in seven countries (mostly in West Africa) in the last three years alone. These countries include Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger Republic, Chad, Gabon and Sudan. Even though African citizens are committed to democracy and have a great desire for political accountability in governance and their hopes have been crushed by the erosion of trust in institutions of governance, propagation of ALD theory through civilianisation of military regimes, a façade aimed at maintaining a veto actor role to capture political institutions.

15 Przeworski A. 2019. "A conceptual history of political regimes: Democracy, dictatorship, and authoritarianism," Wiatr JJ (ed). *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st century.* Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich 17-36.

16 Przeworski, "A conceptual history of political regimes".

17 Fanon F. 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth.* Paris: François Maspero.

18 Mamdani M. 2018. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 4.

19 Mamdani M. 2020. *Neither settler nor native: The making and unmaking of permanent minorities.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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State capture is also often linked to political clientelism. Clientelism, involving personalised relationships and conditional loyalties within the framework of populism and authoritarianism, often intersects with ethnicity. Ethnicity requires identification with a particular group, influencing political and social life. In Africa, these concepts rarely operate in isolation; they often complement and reinforce each other. The overlap between clientelism and ethnicity poses challenges for analysis, as actions appearing ethnic may be rooted in clientelist ties, and individuals can bridge both worlds. The interplay between these dynamics yields diverse outcomes, from strengthening or diluting ethnic identities to fostering national integration. Clientelism can merge individual identities with patrons' ethnicities, redefine ethnic identities within broader contexts or facilitate the amalgamation of ethnic identities within a national framework. These dynamics operate at various levels, influencing personal bonds and political power consolidation.[20] Many African countries are ethnically diverse, and politicians frequently manipulate ethnic divisions to gain support. This ethnic dimension poses challenges to conducting free and fair elections. Ethnic conflicts and political violence have occurred in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Sudan, among others.

The connection of authoritarianism and populism connection to social and economic conditions, as explained by the ALD theory, is unmistakable, particularly during economic hardship and societal unrest, when individuals tend to gravitate toward authoritarian leaders offering the promise of reinstating order and security. Thomas Pettigrew, an American social psychologist, underscores this link, supported by research demonstrating increased support for authoritarian figures amid such circumstances.[21] He further explores the theory of relative deprivation, contending that those who feel deprived relative to others are more predisposed to prejudice and discrimination, potentially fostering authoritarianism as they rally behind leaders vowing to restore justice and equality. This reveals that authoritarianism is not solely rooted in personality traits but substantially shaped by social and economic factors, a crucial consideration for crafting strategies to combat it. Examples illustrating this relationship include the increased support for authoritarian leaders during economic hardship in response to social change or minority presence and among those who perceive resource inequality. Thus, any promises that "life will be better when I come to power" become attractive to the population.

This approach of democracy to economic development and improved livelihood, often polarising the people against the elite, has been used by politicians in Kenya as a drive to garner support from the electorate. Kenya's current president, William Ruto, campaigned under the motto of a "hustler government," portraying

20 Wang Y and Kolev K. 2019. "Ethnic group inequality, partisan networks, and political clientelism", *Political Research Quarterly* 72(2):329-341.

21 Pettigrew TF. 2016. "In pursuit of three theories: Authoritarianism, relative deprivation, and intergroup contact", *Annual Review of Psychology* 67:1-21.

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his administration as one dedicated to uplifting the poor, including the "*mama mboga*"—reference to women who sell vegetables to make a living. His political symbol, a wheelbarrow, resonated with this narrative, helping him gain significant popularity in the regions of Central Kenya and the Rift Valley, where both he and his deputy originate.

Demo-economics refers to democracy for economic development and improved livelihoods. Political leaders that advance demo-economics aim to prioritise promises over improved livelihoods over civil liberties. You will often hear the expression: "even if he is a dictator, at least he has brought development and improved people's lives". It is as though all civil liberties can be compromised as long as the population "lives a better life". This benevolent dictatorship approach is much more attractive when poverty levels and unemployment are high. However, in most cases it is difficult to find a just comparative medium for measuring civil liberties against economic development.

There are two reasons that explain the constant tension between promotion of democratic values and adherence to the same values: First, the qualitative nature of civil liberties is often perceived to be pegged on the Western models of democracy that attach significance to particular freedoms or civil rights that some African governments or populations may not find relevant or a priority. Examples include a populist leader who takes power through a coup d'état and gets massive reception from a population that had hitherto been under an inefficient or oppressive government. Such was the case in Mali, Gabon, Niger and Burkina Faso. Even though the act is unconstitutional, the desperation for peace, stability and economic emancipation drives the population to what I refer to as "alternatives that matter". The people of Niger and Mali were angry against their governments' failure to address terrorism and poverty, and they were subsequently willing to accept unconstitutional political change, hence the massive population support on the streets. Equally, an authoritarian government that has brought peace and stability in the country after years of civil war, struggle for independence or massive crimes against humanity tend to earn popular legitimacy based on the history of liberation. In most cases, such leaders seek to prolong their stay in power through constant mutilation of the constitution, reinvention of their relevance for the population, seeking populist agendas for the population and securitising all governance structures. Such is the case in Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Cameroon. The "alternatives that matter" can become subversive to the "standard practice of democracy", often through the populist drive by political leaders for a democracy that is relevant to "our people". In most cases, these would include undermining civil rights, increasing the powers of the presidency and diminishing the powers of legislatures (parliament and congress) and the judiciary and creating perceptions of a "needed leader" amongst the population.

Authoritarian leaders leverage political institutions to solidify their power and stifle dissent, using the military to suppress opposition, the bureaucracy to control

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information and resources and the judiciary to enforce the regime's laws.[22] This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to authoritarian rule, explains variations in regime durability and sheds light on the challenges authoritarian regimes encounter during democratisation. Empirical support for this institutional approach is seen in studies linking powerful militaries to regime survival and autonomous judiciaries to democratic transitions.[23] The institutional perspective underscores the need for institutional reform to promote democracy and international efforts to support institutions that enhance accountability and transparency in authoritarian settings.[24]

PHILOSOPHY OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND POPULISM

Authoritarianism and populism are two political concepts that are often linked together. Whereas authoritarianism is a form of government characterised by a strong central authority, limited individual liberties and suppression of dissent, populism is a political ideology that pits "the people" against "the elite" and promises to represent the interests of the common people. Populism often emerges as a response to the concentration of power in the hands of elites. It is characterised by a stark distinction between "the people" and "the elites.[25] Authoritarian populism is not limited to autocratic regimes only. Liberal democracies still grapple with political oligarchy and economic class divides, necessitating institutional mechanisms to empower ordinary citizens and constrain elites. Populism, from this perspective, serves as a corrective force within the liberal order that employs Machiavellian strategies of competing interests that focus on the use of power and deception to achieve political goals and strategies to engage with the political system and assert the popular will.[26]

Authoritarian leaders employ various strategies to harness populism for their benefit. These strategies involve appealing to voters' emotions, particularly their fears, anger and resentment, while positioning themselves as defenders of the people against a corrupt elite. Additionally, they demonise opponents, making them scapegoats for the nation's issues and framing them as enemies of its values. They also leverage populism to justify undermining democratic institutions like the

22 Adler PS et al. 2012. "Authoritarianism, populism, and the global retreat of democracy: A curated discussion", *Journal of Management Inquiry* 32(1):3-20.

23 Bethell L. 2018. "Populism in Brazil", in *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics*. London: University of London Press, 175-194.

24 Pepinsky T. 2014. "The institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism", *British Journal of Political Science* 44(3):631-653.

25 Bonikowski B et al. 2019. "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: a scholarly exchange", *Nations and nationalism* 25(1):58-81.

26 Möller K. 2024. "Populism and the political system: A critical systems theory approach to the study of populism", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 50(2):299-322.

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media, judiciary and independent civil society groups, portraying these institutions as part of the elite and contrary to the people's interests.[27]

In Europe, political leaders who have employed these tactics include Adolf Hitler, who historically exploited populist rhetoric to consolidate power and scapegoated minority groups, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, who appealed to nationalistic sentiments and undermined democratic institutions, illustrate the application of these strategies to gain and maintain power.[28] Other notable leaders following Machiavellian tactics, often utilising populist strategies to maintain their power include President Vladimir Putin of Russia, who positions himself as Russia's defender against the West, while attributing economic problems to Western sanctions. He also accuses the Ukrainian government of being a Western puppet and engaging in the alleged genocide of Russian speakers. Moreover, President Putin has taken measures to control the media and extend his term until 2036, illustrating authoritarian populism to solidify his authority. President Viktor Mihály Orbán of Hungary has adopted a similar approach by positioning himself as Hungary's defender against immigrants, while placing blame for social issues on liberals. In addition, authoritarian leaders demonise their adversaries, labelling them as threats to the nation and employing propaganda to smear their reputations. President Orbán, for instance, has undermined the independence of the judiciary and enhanced his influence over the electoral process.[29] These tactics exemplify how authoritarian populism serves as a tool for these leaders to strengthen their grip on power.

In the United States, recently re-elected President Donald Trump's authoritarian populism has been characterised by opposition to trade agreements and a fusion of economic and cultural concerns. His approach reshaped U.S. politics by tapping into a broad spectrum of populist discontent from the left and right. While it does not signify the end of neoliberalism, Trump's populism may lead to a more repressive form of authoritarian statism, while retaining core neoliberal policies.[30] In Latin America, populist leaders like the late Hugo Chávez, former president of Venezuela, appealed to the poor with promises of wealth redistribution and anti-corruption efforts, while blaming economic issues on elites and the United States. Former president Rafael Correa of Ecuador used populism to criticise the media and judiciary and expanded his authority through constitutional amendments. In Bolivia, former president Evo Morales mobilised support through mass rallies, social media, and patronage systems.[31] Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro,

27 Möller, "Populism and the political system".

28 Möller, "Populism and the political system".

29 Möller, "Populism and the political system".

30 Chacko P and Jayasuriya K 2017. "Trump, the authoritarian populist revolt and the future of the rules-based order in Asia", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71(2):121-127.

31 Levitsky S and Loxton J. 2015. "Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes", in Croissant A et al (eds), *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-First Century*, London: Routledge, 185-214.

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employed populist tactics, exploiting economic inequality, corruption, and eroding trust in democratic institutions. His rhetoric targeted voters' fears, promising solutions to crime, pledging to restore Brazil's greatness, and making divisive remarks. Bolsonaro's strategies included media attacks, appointing loyalists, spreading misinformation on social media, endorsing violence against critics, and proposing constitutional changes to consolidate power.[32] Additionally, President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela stacked the Supreme Court with loyalists and used the military to suppress dissent.[33]

In Africa, the Ugandan government, led by President Yoweri Museveni, has leveraged populism to legitimise its authoritarian inclinations, employing legal manoeuvres to enact laws that stifle dissent and consolidate power within Museveni's regime. Additionally, the government has resorted to violence to quell protests against these repressive laws and Museveni's rule. Examples include the Public Order Management Act, 2013, which restricted political parties from holding rallies without government permission, ostensibly to maintain public order, but in practice, stifling opposition gatherings. Similarly, the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023, justified as protecting traditional Ugandan values, has been used to persecute the LGBTQ+ community.[34]

To further confirm the ALD theory, in Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta's leadership, established after coups in 2020 and 2021, demonstrates the use of populist rhetoric to consolidate power and hence capture the population. His administration distanced itself from France, positioning this move as reclaiming national sovereignty and economic control over natural resources while fostering ties with Russia, including engaging the Wagner Group.[35] Goïta emphasised that Mali would no longer depend on France to fight terrorism and ordered the departure of the French forces. This shift, however, coincided with authoritarian governance tactics of state capture such as suppressing dissent, delaying elections and centralising decision-making.

Similarly, in Niger, General Abdourahamane Tchiani's 2023 coup leveraged anti-colonial sentiments against France to garner public support amidst economic and security challenges. He expressed his commitment to protecting the natural resources of Niger, improving the population's economic needs and ascertaining security. However, at the same time, he applied the ALD approaches to governance

32 Daly T. 2019. "Populism, public law, and democratic decay in Brazil: understanding the rise of Jair Bolsonaro". Paper prepared for the 14th International Human Rights Researchers' Workshop, "Democratic Backsliding and Human Rights", organised by the *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* (LEHR) journal organised by the, 2-3.

33 Daly, "Populism, public law, and democratic decay in Brazil".

34 Goodfellow T. 2014. "Legal manoeuvres and violence: Law making, protest and semi-authoritarianism in Uganda", *Development and Change* 45(4):753-776.

35 Mussa M and Dubianskij M. 2023. "Black Cat in a Dark Room": Examining the Impact of Russia's Wagner Group in the Central African Republic and Mali", *Journal of International Affairs* 75(2):209–232; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). 2022. "Populist civil society, the Wagner Group, and post-coup politics in Mali", West Africa Paper, No. 36. Paris: OECD, July.

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by dissolving democratic institutions and restricting political opposition,[36] hence granting himself unopposed rule. When the Economic Community of the West Africa States (ECOWAS) threatened military intervention in Niger to restore constitutional order, Mali and Burkina Faso threatened to militarily defend the former. The three countries pledged mutual defence, withdrew from ECOWAS and reinforced their opposition to external interventions.

Captain Ibrahim Traoré's leadership, emerging from coups in 2022 and 2023, mirrored the above patterns in Burkina Faso. His administration employed anti-French rhetoric and aligned with Russia to reinforce populist narratives of sovereignty and independence, while assuring the population of security against terrorist groups. While these strategies garnered domestic support, his regime applied state capture by postponing elections, exercising excessive control over parliament, restricting civil liberties and suppressing political dissent to consolidate military power.[37] Burkina Faso's alliance with Mali and Niger highlighted a collective resistance to ECOWAS and signalled a shift toward regional alliances based on shared nationalist agendas.[38]

QUADRO-CAPTURE OF THE STATE: THE IMPACT OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND POPULISM ON DEMOCRACY

Authoritarianism and populism pose significant challenges to democracy. They undermine democratic norms and values, weaken checks and balances, restrict media freedom, fuel polarisation, threaten minority rights, and disrupt international cooperation.[39] Authoritarian leaders often disregard crucial democratic elements like the rule of law, separation of powers, and human rights eroding the foundations of democracy. They concentrate power weaken democratic institutions and limit civil liberties. Populist leaders exploit societal divisions, polarising the public and eroding trust in democratic institutions.[40] They portray themselves as the sole representatives of the people, ignoring pluralism and checks and balances.[41]

These ideologies weaken checks and balances within democracies. Authoritarians centralise authority in the executive branch, diminish oversight mechanisms and manipulate courts, whereas populist leaders may disregard institutional constraints, eroding public confidence in the democratic system. Moreover, authoritarian regimes suppress independent media, control information and curtail press

36 International Crisis Group. 2023. "Niger: Containing the Fallout from the Coup", CrisisGroup.org, 4 October; Roger B. 2024. "Burkina Faso's Ibrahim Traoré: Saviour or dictator?" *The Africa Report*, 14 April.

37 Human Rights Watch. 2024. "Burkina Faso: Events of 2024", HumanRightsWatch.org.

38 "Mali, Niger, Burkina Sign Defense Pact", *The Defense Post*, 16 September 2023.

39 "Mali, Niger, Burkina Sign Defense Pact".

40 Lin B. 2023. "Beyond authoritarianism and liberal democracy: understanding China's artificial intelligence impact in Africa", *Information, Communication & Society* 27(6):1-16.

41 Lin, "Beyond authoritarianism and liberal democracy".

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freedom. Populist leaders attack critical media, fostering a hostile environment for journalism. Furthermore, these ideologies lead to societal polarisation, where authoritarianism silences dissent, causing deep divisions while threatening minority rights.[42] Lastly, international cooperation is disrupted. Authoritarian regimes defy global democratic norms and challenge international agreements, leading to conflicts, thus hindering global cooperation.[43]

State capture and clientelism

The ALD theory above emphasises that state capture by the populist authoritarian leader is a strategy of staying longer in power and controlling all the governance structures. State capture is a concept that has gained attention in recent years, particularly in the context of countries facing challenges in democracy, good governance and the rule of law. It refers to a process where individuals and groups, including business magnates, politicians and criminals, systematically rewrite the formal governance rules to serve their interests, often at the expense of the public good.[44] State capture is a scenario where individuals or entities manipulate government institutions and leaders for their gain, often at the expense of the broader population, involving a web of corruption, influence and power that can subvert the principles of good governance, obtaining control over state regulatory authority without democratic authorisation. It is a complex web of influence and power that involves both public officials and private actors working together to serve their private interests at the expense of the nation.[45]

As noted above, clientelism is a problem that is closely connected to state capture and is often a tool of state capture. Beyond its role in elections, discussed further below, clientelism has broader implications, particularly concerning state capture. For instance, Kenya's political landscape is deeply influenced by ethnic identity, as voters frequently opt for candidates from their ethnic group, expecting benefits in return. However, this relationship is intricate; Kenya is home to numerous smaller ethnic groups, and geographical factors sometimes outweigh ethnic considerations. Vote buying, though illegal, is prevalent, with politicians distributing cash, goods, or incentives to potential voters, yet voters can maintain ballot secrecy. The act of politicians offering gifts is generally seen positively, particularly among the impoverished, signalling a commitment to supporting constituents. While ethnicity plays a significant role, it is not the sole determinant of political behaviour, and various factors, including group size, regional proximity, and poverty, shape

42 Lin, "Beyond authoritarianism and liberal democracy".

43 Lin, "Beyond authoritarianism and liberal democracy".

44 Petrović P. 2020. "State Capture in Serbia–A Conceptual and Contextual", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. Online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep27053.5.pdf

45 Bracking S. 2018. "Corruption & state capture: What can citizens do?" *Daedalus* 147(3):169-183.

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voting patterns and clientelism in Kenyan politics.[46] Clientelism often serves as a critical tool in this process. By maintaining a network of loyal supporters through clientelism strategies, political actors can solidify their influence over state resources, contracts, and decision-making. This practice can erode democratic accountability and impede the effective functioning of state institutions.[47]

Political capture and moral manipulation

Like state capture, political capture involves powerful actors, such as companies and oligarchs, who use private payments to politicians to shape public policy for their own enrichment. However, recent research has shown that political parties, particularly those with oligarchic structures, play a central role in state capture. These parties use their influence within the state apparatus to shape and implement rules and regulations that benefit their interests and those of their close associates.

As demonstrated in the ALD theory, state capture is not a random occurrence but rather a deliberate political-economic project in which political and private actors collaborate to accumulate unchecked power and often begins within the confines of legal and institutional mechanisms. It typically initiates with strategic alterations to primary and secondary legislation, accompanied by the strategic placement of loyalists of influential political figures in key state offices. This phase also involves employing devoted party members at all levels of government institutions while removing potentially inconvenient witnesses from their positions. As state capture progresses, the separation of powers within a nation's governance structure becomes increasingly nominal, with state institutions primarily serving the interests of a select circle of individuals and groups rather than the broader citizenry. Political actors exploit their predecessors' actual or perceived policy failures to justify their pursuit of complete control over state institutions. This involves extracting public resources for private gain and reshaping the balance of power between different social groups, suppressing political opposition, and undermining checks and balances within the government.[48]

State captors often seek political leaders who are perceived as vital, as they are more likely to bend to external pressures. They may exploit a leader's desire to demonstrate decisiveness and firmness, manipulating them into actions that benefit the captors' interests rather than the nation's. State captors' dynamic and persuasive nature can lead them to exploit highly active and extroverted leaders. By appearing enthusiastic and compelling, these captors may manipulate leaders into making decisions and policies that align with their agenda. Moreover, state capture

46 Simiyu R. 2008. "Contextual influences on voting decision: mapping the neighbourhood effect in a multi-ethnic rural setting in Kenya", *South African Geographical Journal* 90(2), 106-121.

47 Simiyu, "Contextual influences on voting decision".

48 Hellman JS, Geraint Jones, G and Kaufmann D. 2000. "Seize the state, seize the day: State capture, corruption and influence in transition". Online at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=240555

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thrives in the shadows of political leaders who lack moral integrity. Leaders who are perceived as dishonest or corrupt become vulnerable targets. State captors may exploit a leader's moral weaknesses to further their agenda.

Economic capture and corruption

State capture occurs when corrupt individuals or entities exploit the weaknesses within a state to further their personal, elite or group interests, whether they be political parties, business associations, religious organisations or others. This phenomenon is characterised by a collaboration between those in power and corrupt actors, often resulting from dysfunctional governance. As the World Bank aptly states, corruption thrives when states are too weak to control their bureaucrats, protect property and contract rights, and establish an effective rule of law.[49] While the focus on state capture typically centres around the state itself, it is essential to explore the connection between corporate governance and national governance. As Joel Hellman and his fellow political scientists have suggested, firms play a crucial role in shaping and influencing the rules of the game, including through legislation, laws, rules and decrees, through private payments to public officials.[50] One of the key strategies employed in the state capture process is the capture of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). State-owned enterprises become lucrative targets for those exploiting their resources for personal gain.[51] This dynamic is particularly evident in transition economies, where businesses use their political influence to distort legal frameworks and policymaking processes for their gain, often to the detriment of the economy and society.

State capture often targets key institutions within a state, including the legislative body, the central bank, the judiciary and the election commission. This practice can be observed in various countries, where particular corrupt behaviour have seemingly facilitated economic development by cutting through bureaucratic red tape.[52] This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "functional corruption," where corruption is viewed as an economic lubricant. However, over the long term, the costs of corruption far outweigh any short-term gains, leading many to advocate for zero tolerance towards corruption. Corruption is further facilitated by policies and legislation, many of which are designed to promote economic growth.[53] While drafting economic regulations, loopholes may be intentionally or unintentionally included, creating opportunities for self-enrichment or corruption. As commonly observed in some countries, ambiguity in legislation hampers enforcement efforts. Decentralisation, while intended to empower local authorities, can lead to abuses of power when governance at the local level is weak.

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49 Lubis TM. 2023. *War on Corruption: An Indonesian Experience*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.

50 Hellman et al, "Seize the state, seize the day".

51 Hellman et al, "Seize the state, seize the day".

52 Hellman et al, "Seize the state, seize the day".

53 Hellman et al, "Seize the state, seize the day".

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While the root of corruption is often domestic, state capture can have international implications. Foreign elements, including international financial institutions, financial advisers, transnational criminal organisations and legal consultants, can facilitate corruption through professional services and collaborations as business partners. As a result, the analysis of corruption and political corruption often transcends national boundaries.[54]

Military and security capture through coup

Security sector institutions become prime targets for political actors in effecting political state capture. They simultaneously amplify their political power by consolidating their influence and control over security sectors. While the number of military coups in Africa has decreased, the military's influence persists through various means. The army coups in seven African countries between 2020-2023, including Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger Republic, Chad, Sudan and Gabon, are seen as indicators of failed democracies in these nations. These coups have exposed the challenges to democracy in West and Central Africa and have raised concerns about the lack of effective responses from regional bodies like ECOWAS. Despite African citizens' commitment to democracy and their desire for accountable governance, widespread corruption and dissatisfaction with political systems have eroded trust.[55] This includes occasional military coups that challenge democratic stability, the presence of civilised military regimes that exert control behind a civilian facade, the prominence of former military leaders in executive positions and the military's role as a veto actor, shaping government policies in a substantial number of Sub-Saharan African countries.[56] These factors highlight the ongoing and multifaceted role of the military in African politics beyond overt coups.

The undermining of term limits through constitutional coups poses a significant threat to the consolidation of democracy in Africa. Term limits have been seen as a means to promote democratisation by limiting incumbents' power and enabling democratic turnover. However, leaders in thirteen African countries have found ways to evade or weaken these restrictions in recent years. For example, leaders like Alassane Ouattara in Côte d'Ivoire have argued that new constitutions effectively reset term limits, allowing them to run for additional terms.[57] This erosion of term limits not only undermines the role of elections in democratisation but has also contributed to violent mobilisation in some countries, exacerbating ethnic

54 Hellman et al, "Seize the state, seize the day".

55 Igbinadolor N. 2023. "Coup in 7 African countries signals failed democracies", *Businessday NG*, 3 September.

56 Basedau M. 2020. "A Force (Still) to Be Reckoned With: The Military in African Politics." German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA).

57 "Ivory Coast's Ouattara says he's free to run again in 2020 - Jeune Afrique", Reuters, 3 June 2018.

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tensions and instability.[58] To address the coup threat, African leaders must focus on legitimacy, good governance and listening to the concerns of their citizens.

The intricate interplay between the political leadership schema and state capture underscores the significance of our cognitive frameworks in shaping our political landscape. To safeguard our democracies and institutions, it is essential to recognise the impact of these schemas and remain vigilant against manipulation by those seeking to exploit them. As citizens and voters, understanding the nuances of leadership schema empowers us to make informed decisions and demand accountability from our leaders, ultimately preserving the principles of good governance and transparency.[59]

Citzenry capture through loss of faith in elections

Over the past decade, Africa has witnessed a wave of political transformations as many nations embarked on the journey towards democratic governance. However, this promising democratic project appears to be in crisis in numerous African states, marked by a gradual and dangerous deinstitutionalisation of autocratic regimes that cloak themselves in the trappings of democracy. In democratic theory, elections hold a central place, closely intertwined with the concept of democracy itself. Elections are often viewed as the essential mechanism through which the citizens express their will, bring about political change and legitimise their political leaders. Austrian political economist Joseph Schumpeter famously defined democracy as a system where people can accept or reject those who will govern them, emphasising that democracy is fundamentally about conducting elections and choosing political leaders. In essence, elections are seen as synonymous with democracy.[60]

Elections play a pivotal role in defining the essence of democracy, as they establish a set of seven fundamental criteria that underpin a democratic system. These criteria encompass the fundamental principles of democracy, such as the imperative for elected officials to be selected and deposed through a process characterised by fairness, freedom and the absence of coercion. [61] Furthermore, they enshrine the fundamental right of nearly all adult citizens to partake in the electoral process, exercising their right to both vote and stand for public office. These criteria are inextricably linked to the concept of elections and their profound significance in upholding democratic governance. However, the link between elections and democracy is not without its challenges and limitations. Alternative perspectives, such as social stratification elite theory and Marxist analysis, offer different viewpoints on this relationship. Elite theory argues that elections primarily serve

58 Mbaku JM. 2020. "Threats to democracy in Africa: The rise of the constitutional coup", Brookings.edu. Washington DC: Brookings Institute.

59 Mbaku, "Threats to democracy in Africa".

60 Ingham S. 2016. "Popular Rule in Schumpeter's Democracy", *Political Studies* 64(4):1071-1087.

61 Cheeseman N and Elklit J. 2020. "Understanding and assessing electoral commission independence: A new framework." London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

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to legitimise the rule of a minority elite. At the same time, Marxist analysis views elections as a system of legitimising the dominant class's power and ideology. These perspectives highlight the limitations of elections in achieving true democracy, particularly when socioeconomic and political inequalities persist.[62]

Understanding the mechanics of elections requires examining the ecological influences shaping them. Election ecology encompasses both the structural framework and environmental context impacting electoral processes. Structurally, elections necessitate a competent, impartial and nonpartisan electoral body overseeing proceedings alongside an independent judiciary interpreting electoral laws and resolving disputes. Other critical structural components entail a free press and an unbiased police force.[63] Moreover, electoral processes encompass diverse elements like electoral laws, party organisation, voter registration, candidate nominations, balloting procedures, vote counting and result announcements.

Environmental conditions conducive to meaningful elections involve socioeconomic and political factors. These include ensuring citizens' economic well-being and social welfare, as extreme poverty may prompt voting in exchange for material incentives. Additionally, the political landscape should uphold majority rule while safeguarding minority rights, promoting transparency and accountability and fostering a culture of tolerance and compromise.[64]

Despite some democratic elements in pre-colonial African political systems, the concept of elections, as understood in Western democracies, was foreign to the continent. The legacy of colonialism, with its authoritarian tendencies, created contradictions within post-colonial African states. The political elites, often shaped by authoritarian colonial systems, struggled to establish impartial electoral processes. Additionally, the post-colonial period saw the persistence of a state-centric approach, limiting the scope and integrity of elections. The result was a constrained electoral space and a politics of de-participation influenced by neo-patrimonialism inherited from colonial rule, characterised by personal accumulation of state resources and social control.[65]

In the post-colonial era, many African nations grappled with one-party rule, military coups and elections that lacked genuine political change. Cold War politics further complicated matters, as international actors supported regimes aligned with their interests, often overlooking democratic deficits. The future of elections and democracy in Africa remains uncertain, with some fearing a return to political turmoil and authoritarianism once global democratic momentum wanes. Others are more optimistic, believing that Africa will eventually achieve political stability

62 Field GL, Higley J and Burton MG. 1990. "A new elite framework for political sociology", *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 28(88):149-182.

63 Higley J. 2010. "Elite theory and elites", in Leicht KT and Jenkins JC (eds) *Handbook of politics: State and society in global perspective*. New York: Springer, 161-176.

64 Higley, "Elite theory and elites".

65 Higley, "Elite theory and elites".

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despite the tumultuous democratisation process. There is also a perspective emphasising the need to consider alternative forms of democratic expression and address deep-seated socioeconomic and political inequalities beyond the focus on multipartyism and elections.

One of the most significant challenges facing African elections is electoral rigging. This practice has become distressingly common in recent years, undermining the credibility of electoral processes and eroding public trust. Incumbent leaders, fearing electoral defeat, have sometimes resorted to manipulating the outcomes through fraud. Political violence is another troubling trend in African elections. In instances where leaders face imminent defeat, they may incite violence to maintain power, as witnessed in Kenya in 2007, where over 1,000 lives were lost in politically motivated violence.[66] A similar scenario unfolded in Zimbabwe, leading to a national unity government to quell tensions. Madagascar and Ivory Coast experienced power struggles and violence following disputed elections.[67]

Some African leaders have avoided elections altogether to remain in power, sparking calls for change.[68] Protests and demands for political change have emerged in various African nations, indicating a growing desire for new leadership. The Senegalese president, Macky Sall, attempted to postpone elections in February 2024, leading to mass protests. The pressure from the masses led the president to change his mind, and elections were held in March, and the opposition candidate, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, won.[69] The Arab Spring in North Africa demonstrated that citizens are increasingly unwilling to tolerate leaders who cling to power for extended periods without democratic mandates.[70]

Reasons or factors influencing citizens' trust in electoral management bodies (EMBs) in many African nations can be categorised into four main correlates of confidence. Firstly, winner/loser status plays a significant role, as supporters of the winning candidate tend to exhibit higher levels of confidence in EMBs, while those on the losing side are more prone to losing trust. Secondly, co-ethnic affiliation is another determinant, as citizens who belong to the same ethnic group as the losing candidate may also experience decreased confidence in EMBs. Thirdly, the perceived performance of EMBs, particularly in terms of autonomy and capacity,

66 Cheeseman N, Lynch G and Willis J. 2014. "Democracy and its discontents: understanding Kenya's 2013 elections", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8(1):2-24.

67 Mapuva J. 2013, "Elections and electoral processes in Africa: A gimmick or a curse", *African Journal of History and Culture* 5(5):87-95. https://academicjournals.org/journal/AJHC/article-full-text-pdf/5A3AB3C40952

68 Ayobami AE and Arulogun CFO. 2019. "Election Postponement and the Future of Democracy in Nigeria", *Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies* 6(6):95-100.

69 Sany J. 2024. "Surviving its crisis, Senegal bolsters an arc of democracies against the region's coups", USIP.org. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 4 April.

70 Obse K. 2014. "The Arab Spring and the question of legality of democratic revolution in theory and practice: a perspective based on the African Union normative framework", *Leiden Journal of International Law* 27(4):817-838.

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strongly affects trust. When EMBs are perceived as lacking in these aspects, it often leads to diminished confidence among the public. Lastly, political awareness plays a crucial role, with politically informed citizens, especially losers, being more susceptible to losing confidence in EMBs due to their exposure to criticisms and framing by the losing candidates. These factors collectively shape the complex landscape of electoral trust in the continent.[71]

Independent and non-partisan electoral management bodies (EMBs) are crucial for ensuring free and fair elections. EMBs oversee voter registration, election conduct, ballot counting and transparency. The capacity of electoral management bodies which oversee elections is a crucial factor in ensuring the proper functioning of electoral processes. Capacity refers to an EMB's ability to perform its functions effectively and achieve its objectives. This includes having the necessary financial and personnel resources to conduct elections efficiently. Adequate funding is essential for covering expenses such as salaries, office space, voting materials and public outreach campaigns. However, the relationship between funding and EMB performance is complex, as higher budgets may predict better electoral integrity but still need to guarantee it. Staffing levels also vary among EMBs, with some employing more personnel during election periods. Foreign assistance further complicates the measurement of EMB resources, making it challenging to determine the true costs and capacities involved in running elections.[72] African countries with strong, independent EMBs tend to have more successful and credible elections. Examples include Botswana and South Africa, which have had successful elections and whose EMBs have been independent in managing elections.

CONCLUSION

Authoritarianism and populism, characterised by centralised power, suppression of dissent and weakening democratic institutions, pose profound challenges to democracy. These ideologies erode democratic norms, weaken checks and balances, curtail media freedom and fuel polarisation. They concentrate power, limit civil liberties and undermine trust in democratic institutions, threatening minority rights and international cooperation. We, thus, see state capture through the various dimensions of political capture, economic capture, military capture and the capture of the citizenry through manipulation and loss of faith in elections.

Africa's journey toward democracy and electoral governance has been marked by complex challenges rooted in its colonial history and post-colonial experiences. While elections are central to democratic theory, their implementation in Africa has often fallen short of genuine democratic ideals. It is, therefore, critical to explore alternative systems of governance that are more inclusive and participatory.

71 Erlich A and Kerr N. 2016. "'The local mwananchi has lost trust': design, transition and legitimacy in Kenyan election management", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54(4):671-702.

72 Garnett HA. 2019. "Evaluating electoral management body capacity", *International Political Science Review* 40(3):335-353.

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Governance is a fundamental component in the pursuit of global peace and stability, extending from conflict prevention to conflict management and resolution.

Participation and representation are core elements of governance that expand public engagement in decision-making. Accountability and transparency further contribute to governance quality, ensuring institutions are responsive and responsible. Governance intersects with state and nation-building, particularly in heterogeneous societies like those in Africa. The African context highlights the crucial link between governance and conflict management, emphasising the need to end conflicts, demilitarise politics, address societal grievances and strengthen state institutions as essential steps toward achieving peace and stability in the region.[73]

While democratic systems of governance have been widely adopted worldwide, it is essential to acknowledge that alternative models exist. Three alternative governance approaches, including participatory governance, rotational governance and devolved/federal systems of governance, have been exercised in Africa. These alternatives offer unique perspectives on how societies can organise themselves and make decisions, challenging the conventional understanding of democracy. Addressing broader social and political issues like inequality and polarisation is crucial. Understanding authoritarianism through psychological, social, institutional and critical theories offers insights to combat it, from promoting critical thinking to addressing social inequalities and strengthening democratic institutions.

Lastly, exploring alternative governance models in Africa offers a fresh perspective on how diverse societies can address complex ethnic, cultural and historical dynamics. Participatory governance, rotational governance and devolved systems provide unique solutions to the continent's governance challenges. As Africa evolves and confronts its governance issues, these alternatives should be considered part of an ongoing dialogue to build more inclusive, stable and effective societies. The importance of adaptability, inclusivity and informed decision-making must be addressed in a world characterised by complex social changes—particularly where authoritarian and populist leadership styles constitute new threats to democracy.

73 Khadiagala GM. 2015. "Silencing the Guns: Strengthening Governance to Prevent, Manage and Resolve Conflicts in Africa". New York: International Peace Institute, 1-32.

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