



CHAPTER 8

Leadership, Context, and Populist Foreign Policy in East Africa: An Analysis of Uganda and Rwanda

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INTRODUCTION

Populism can be understood as the reliance on strong leaders, whom, for political gain mobilize the masses aiming at enacting radical reforms in the name of the “people.” Through their action and speech, populist leaders present themselves as the voice of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Nyadera & Agwanda, 2019; Giovanni, 2005). While populism is intensely debated in Europe and North America, there is now growing interest in the phenomenon among many African countries. For instance, citing

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examples of populist political parties and leaders from South Africa, Kenya, and Zambia, Nyadera and Agwanda (2019) connected the emergence of populism in Africa to failure by political leaders to offer a tangible development agenda to a burgeoning urban poor population that constitute the largest voting bloc. The above examples however are not unique cases in Africa.

Within the East African Community, the actions and styles of leaders such as Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and Paul Kagame of the National Resistance Army (NRA) and the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) of Uganda and Rwanda, respectively, have led the media to label them populists (Giovanni, 2005). With a common history as “liberators” in their respective countries, the two share a populist style; they project themselves as true defenders of “their people” against an “elite” who has betrayed them.

While scholars of Europe and North America may lament about populism as a threat to democracy (Müller, 2016), it is not exactly the same in Africa. In Africa, strong personality in leadership is often considered necessary especially while transiting from a chaotic political and military situation to democratization. Populist leaders in Africa have been in most cases glorified as defenders of nationalism, guarantors of peace and stability, and defenders of the territorial integrity of their respective countries. However, it may also be misleading to generalize that there is a single populist approach to foreign policy in Africa or indeed in the world, as certain structural conditions and histories may lead them to act in particular ways (Giovanni, 2005; Nyadera & Agwanda, 2019), as argued by Wajner and Giurlando (2023) in the introductory chapter to this edited volume.

This chapter examines in greater depth the phenomenon of populism in the East African countries of Uganda and Rwanda, connecting it to the rich anti-colonial history of populist movements and the post-independence populist political leaders and their organizations, whose failures gave birth to the new breed of African populist liberation movements and leaders. In so doing, it attempts to answer three fundamental questions: *What are the historical political conditions that have led to the rise of populist leaders in Africa? What foreign policy strategies have these populist leaders adopted in the management of their countries? What can we learn from the experience of populism in Uganda and Rwanda?* Therefore, the chapter is structured into three main parts: The Contemporary Context of Populism in Africa; Populism in Uganda and Yoweri Museveni’s Populist Foreign Strategies/Policy; and Populism in Rwanda and Paul Kagame’s Populist Foreign

Strategies/Policy. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the Future of Populism in Africa within the current complex and dynamic conditions of global and regional geopolitics.

THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULISM IN AFRICA

The precursor to the current growing phenomenon of populism in Africa is the anti-colonial movement of the 1950s and 1962 when many African people struggled to free themselves from the bonds of colonial rule. However, this type of populism can be understood differently from the current meaning which connotes radicalism and anti-establishment (Makulilo, 2013). The rise of African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, and Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, whose popularity grew with the gains of independence, marked a distinctive feature of populism in the African Continent. Yet, the failings of the independence populist leaders quickly gave way to the rise of a “new breed of African Leaders” whose populist domestic and foreign agenda was marked by military revolutionary movements and interventions. The case of Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame explored in this chapter illustrates this breed of populists.

Uganda’s Domestic and Foreign Relations Before Museveni

The rise of President Museveni, who has now dominated the political scene of Uganda for more than 35 years, can be traced to the country’s colonial and post-colonial history. The British colonial system nurtured a syndrome of dependency and as such, the country became dependent on International Financial Institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and some countries in Europe and Asia, for its economic and political survival. But, as a land-locked country, Uganda has tried to maintain good relations with its East African neighbors of Kenya and Tanzania which gives access to the Indian Ocean. This has allowed the country to have relatively stable diplomatic relations with other countries—which were however halted during the Amin regime (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1987; Rugumamu & Gbla, 2004).

Populism in Uganda can be traced as early as the immediate independence years. In 1963, Obote adopted the non-alignment principle, thereby

strengthening diplomatic relations with both East and Western camps. However, he could not sustain that stance because foreign aid could not come forth if diplomatic and economic relations were not strengthened with the West. Threatened by the declining diplomatic ties with the West, Obote opened relations with African countries of Tanzania and Zambia that were already on the Socialist path. Diplomatic relations were also strengthened with China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union.

During the Amin era (1971–1979), Britain regarded Uganda as an ally in the fight against the growing threat of communism in Africa and Uganda in particular. Throughout 1971, Britain remained Uganda's chief trading partner. But Amin had no clear economic policy—all he wanted was to appease the West by reversing Obote's socialist ideas. In Africa, while Malawi, Liberia, Ghana, and Zaire as well as Nigeria recognized Amin's government, Tanzania, Guinea, Somalia, and Sudan refused. The economy slowly collapsed and so did the support from the West. The worst would probably come as the government expelled Asians and most of them had British passports. At this point, bilateral relations with Britain declined, affecting the flow of aid to Uganda. Worse, together with its ally Israel, Britain slapped an embargo against Uganda.

Amin had also often accused Kenya of supporting Israel in the Entebbe raid and so he threatened to invade Kenya. In response, Kenya declared a trade embargo on Uganda. In his second government from 1980–1985, Obote prepared to restore economic and political relations that had been affected during the Amin regime. Instead of continuing with his socialist ideas, he introduced a *mixed economy* in which the state, the private sector, and the cooperative movement would play an active role. He also promised to guarantee British investments. In return, the British promised diplomatic support and did indeed take part in many development programs in Uganda. At home, Obote promised to revive relations with neighboring countries (Rugumanu & Gbla, 2004).

At a regional level, Obote supported the rebirth of the EAC and worked for continued economic cooperation in the region and committed to the OAU and NAM principles. Internally, however, peace in some parts of the country did not easily come by and made it hard for the country to improve its economic relations. In January 1986, Museveni through military power seized control and ended Obote's second government and the other short-lived governments in Uganda.

Museveni's Populism and Uganda's Domestic Policy

Museveni took power in 1986 after his National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) guerrillas captured Kampala the capital city of Uganda after a five-year war. Since then, and similar to populists elsewhere, he has been considered the only “visionary leader” in his political party NRM and in Uganda. Like all populists do, he has created himself as an outsider in the Ugandan politics when he launched the rebellion in 1981 despite him being a very active member in the pre-1980 politics as a Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) Youth Winger under Obote I government; as well as a Minister in the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) government that removed Amin with the help of Tanzania and also participating in the 1980 elections as a presidential candidate of UPM party. He has extensively utilized populist discourses, for example attacking past governments like Obote and Amin’s governments as anti-people and corrupt while portraying himself and his army as disciplined and pro-people forces (Giovanni, 2005).

During his rebellion, Museveni formed Resistance Councils (RCs) for the restoration of the power of the people. He immediately legislated against the operations of political parties after taking power. He has been organizing elections since 1996 and emerging victorious in every presidential election. He has also been a chairman of his party, the NRM, since it was formed in 1996 when the Movement System became NRM party. Museveni’s populism was noted earlier on when his regime launched the *Ten Point Program* in which the economic and political priorities were outlined as a pro-people strategy which was developed during the “liberation” struggle. They embraced a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist approach in the economy while openly condemning neo-colonial economic relations. For some time, they deliberately refused to cooperate with Western financial institutions and blamed them for draining the Ugandan economy (The ten-point program, 2022).

Portraying himself as a revolutionary, relations were established with Samora Machel of Mozambique, Sankara of Burkina Faso, Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, and Mengistu of Ethiopia, as well as Gadaffi of Libya—all Marxist-oriented leaders. But if the economy was to be revamped, he realized he needed the imperialists he had cursed. He therefore dropped his socialist rhetoric and established ties with the West (Giovanni, 2005).

Using the Revolutionarism mantra, he justifies himself as the only vision holder for his Party and the embodiment of Uganda as a whole. He is

quoted to have said that his bush war was successful because of the existence of a revolutionary leadership able to do two things: articulate how much better the future will be when the revolutionary forces win and convince the people by advocacy and actions that it is possible to triumph (Museveni, 2022). As a revolutionary in power, he rebukes those who ask him about retirement—after all, revolutionary populists don't retire; they pursue their vision for the country until they achieve it. For instance, in an interview with the BBC, he expressed his unreadiness to leave power because he had an unfinished job (BBC, February 17, 2016).

His revolutionary populism has led to authoritarian tactics, as demonstrated by his unwillingness to be removed through the ballot. Indeed, Museveni has been an active participant in all the elections organized since 1996 to present. Contrary to campaigns on effecting radical transformations for the betterment of the people, results have been by and large a failure and responsible for the emergence of economic and leadership crises (Makulilo, 2013).

Museveni has also lived to the known tenet of populism which is manifested in “Saviorism/messianism.” His character and talk for the entire period of his rule has been of a savior of the country and the only guarantor of security, stability, and prosperity of Uganda. He has advanced State security at the expense of freedom to the extent that during his rule legislation that limits freedoms has been entertained even by the Judiciary that seem not ready to provide the check and balance to the executive. Consistent with populists' tendency to interpret the world in a Manichean manner, dissidents are seen as enemies contradicting a messiah and are treated as such. It has been stated in the BTI Transformation Index (2022) that in Uganda the Institutions of State security and the ruling party have become so intertwined that the separation of powers looks suspended. This can be attributed to the strong personality character of Museveni who, as already observed above, has arrogated to himself the position of a single vision bearer for the country. In the same BTI report, it is said that Uganda's constitution provides for institutional differentiation of state organs; however, these are often overstepped, usually by the President while undermining separation of powers.

Museveni's activities also resonate well with the concept of “People-powerism.” Populists ride on the mantra of returning power to the people, who were previously alienated from political processes—but at the expense of institutions that would offer an effective check on presidential power. Museveni rode on this kind of populism when he levied a war against the

Obote II government and instituted direct democracy from the bottom up through what he called Resistance Councils (RCs)—now Local Councils (LCs). With direct democracy, he sidelined and banned political parties for 20 years since 1986. Even when he reluctantly opened the political space for parties, the activities of opposition political parties were severely restricted and deliberately weakened by the regime. State institutions have been emasculated to the extent that they almost always find themselves falling in line with what Museveni wants. The few times institutions such as the judiciary have contradicted him and ruled against him, Museveni has not been shied to tell them he would use political and popular means (referenda) to sort them out. Museveni’s People-powerism has made him despise institutions that guarantee checks on him (Atuhaire, BBC News, 2021).

Museveni’s Populist Foreign Policy

It has been observed by many scholars, captured in the introduction to this volume, that regimes design foreign policies that are reflective of the ideological bent of a leader, and domestic political dynamics and calculi. Because of these predicates, or others like them, Uganda’s foreign policies under Milton Obote were not identical to those of Idi Amin, and Museveni’s are not identical to those of Milton Obote nor Idi Amin’s. However, it is also true that foreign policies are predicated on a state’s national interests (i.e., the security of state and its people, as well as the protection of its natural endowments, wealth, and civilization). This subsection discusses the individual foreign actions of Museveni that project him as a populist leader.

Similar to the regional integration efforts of populists in Latin America (see Chap. 6), Museveni has expressed a Pan-Africanist foreign policy since rising to power. He has emphasized that Uganda’s foreign policy should be outward-looking to assist other African “brothers” who might need help. Contemporaneously, Museveni has been portrayed as a warmonger. Since 1986, Uganda has been a staging ground for regional military interventions in countries as far as Liberia, Somalia, and the Central African Republic. Due to these interventions and his political work in Uganda especially in the 1990s, Museveni gained a label of the new breed of post-Cold War African statesman (Centre for Policy Analysis, 2022).

It is evident that Museveni has also generated controversy when supporting rebels in other African countries. It is on record that he backed

Laurent Kabila, who removed Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997. The accusation was that Mobutu's Zaire harbored dangerous elements that would come and destabilize the security of Uganda. Indeed, this was proved by the attack of Kichwamba Technical College near the Uganda DRC border by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) that moved from the DRC. It is also claimed that Museveni was behind the removal of the Habyarimana government in Rwanda by supporting the Tutsi exiles some of whom (including President Paul Kagame of Rwanda) had participated in the NRM guerrilla war in Uganda from 1980 to 1986 and were part of the NRA army after the capture of Kampala.

Likewise, his efforts were cited in supporting a group, headed by one of his former schoolmates John Garanga, battling the Islamic fundamentalist rulers of Sudan. Museveni justified his support of rebels by stating that his goal was to achieve regional integration in both politics and economics and that the downfall of corrupt regimes was necessary to bring about such a union. He has also been praised for his participation in the peace enforcement in Somalia by contributing troops to the African Union's force (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022).

There are important factors which constrain PFP in the case of Uganda. For instance, location: as a landlocked country that needs to cooperate for international trade and commerce, and second as a country that exists in a tumultuous region with which it needs mutual security and trade. The military instrument cannot be dismissed in the implementation of a foreign policy, but also it can only go as far as contributing to the achievement of foreign policy goals in tandem with other instruments in the toolbox of a state. These can be briefly explained below.

Friction between Uganda and Kenya has been inevitable regardless of who is in power, experiencing a roller-coaster ride in their relations swinging between friendship and hostility from 1970 onward resulting in both countries mobilizing their troops in July 1976 and December 1987 (Okoth, 1992) under Amin and Museveni, respectively. Despite the frictions, the two countries have maintained a peaceful policy regardless of whether it is Jomo Kenyatta and Arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta in Kenya against Obote I&II, Amin or Museveni in Uganda. Partly, this may be explained by Uganda's reliance on the Kenyan ports of Mombasa for her international trade. The two countries have also been calculative enough to avoid escalation into a direct confrontation when there have

been disputes confirming that the duo's foreign policy has been dictated by geopolitics.

The Museveni regime's Sudan Policy is a clear example of how geography and the security interest blended to shape the foreign policy of Uganda under Museveni. In the late 1980s, while Uganda still shared a border with Sudan to the north, Museveni had to deal with the security headache visited upon him by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Uganda's Sudan policy was one of hostility and military intervention, albeit indirectly through arming, training, and providing sanctuary to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This could have given an opportunity to Museveni to project his populist "savior of the nation" mantra, but one may not disregard the national security factor that existed.

Uganda's recent military intervention in South Sudan when the crisis erupted on the 15th of December 2013 is worth noting.

Like in the case of the Sudan policy, Uganda's DRC policy has not been static. It has changed based on the security climate to a larger degree and on geography. It is important to remember that Uganda's military action during the war was not against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) which were using the Congolese territory to launch attacks against Uganda (Venugopala, 2016), but against the Congolese army. The aim was to replace the government of Mobutu, which had failed to address the security needs of Uganda since the ADF freely carried out attacks on Uganda from the Congolese territory. Uganda's border with the DRC is very porous and hard to guard, which made it easy for the ADF to launch attacks inside Uganda. However, in recent times, Uganda's DRC policy has shifted from conflict to economics, and in the pursuit of that, the Museveni government has planned to spend 200 billion Uganda shillings on constructing roads in Eastern Congo to facilitate cross-border trade between Uganda and the DRC (Ojambo, 2020).

One must also look at Uganda's Rwanda Policy which has been a blend of domestic political considerations, ideological drives, and security interests. The role of the Museveni administration in the 1990–1994 Rwanda Civil war which was noted earlier illustrates this point. In the period between 1990 and 1994, Museveni supported the RPF against the government in Rwanda. He owed them a debt. They were comrades in arms during Museveni's struggle against Amin, Obote, and Okello Lutwa (Kuperman, 2003; Kamukama, 1993; Watson, 1991). Today and in the recent past, Uganda's relations with Rwanda can be described as uneasy to

the extent that the common border between the two countries had to be closed for over one year.

Following the above analysis of Uganda's populist leader, we can conclude that foreign policy in Africa is often motivated by regime survival, and thus highly personalized, politicized, and centralized, patterns consistent with some expectations outline in the PFP literature. However, other factors cannot be neglected like the geographical location of a country, national security considerations, and others. Whereas it is a fact that Museveni shot his way to power by the gun and the bullet, his foreign policies toward Uganda's neighbors have not been uniform and consistent. While some have been militaristic and aggressive in their international interactions, others have been friendly and cooperative, depending mainly on whether the neighbor provided conditions of peace or hostility, and on the calculus of whether he had a comparative military edge that would guarantee the achievement of his foreign policy goals and survival for his government.

PAUL KAGAME AND RWANDA'S POPULIST FOREIGN STRATEGIES/POLICY

It is now well acknowledged that foreign policy is an understudied subject of post-genocide Rwanda, and much less studied is Rwanda's populist foreign policy. Rwanda is an interesting case study of African foreign policy because of its ability to combine hard (military) and soft (socio-economic performance and international perception) power to attain domestic and global interests despite the deep structural challenges (Handy, 2021). Herein, an account of populism in Rwanda is given building on the different aspects of populist foreign policy—as an ideology, a strategy, style, and practice, as discussed in the introductory chapter. While narrating how President Kagame has risen as a populist leader, the discussion does not shy away from crediting his good deeds. But first is a tale of how the genocide aided in the creation of a populist leader in Africa.

The Catastrophic Genocide and the Creation of a Populist Leader

In 2015, 95% of the voters in Rwanda agreed to a Constitutional reform that allowed the sitting president to reign over the country at least until 2034 (BBC, 2017; Bouleanu, 2018). President Kagame intimated that he

disliked *eternal leadership*, but the people had given the verdict. As Rwandans moved to fulfill a democratic principle, they gave a direct ticket to a political messiah to consolidate authority (BTI, 2022). President Kagame's would say that he deserves this political reward for his historical sacrifice and steady leadership. In 1962, following the departure of the colonial master and subsequently, the transfer of power into a Hutu-controlled political environment, President Kagame became one of the thousands of Tutsis that fled the country into adjacent neighbors. Born in 1957 in Southern Rwanda and raised in refugee communities of neighboring Uganda, he witnessed oppression meted upon him and his people at a tender age (Ruhumuliza, 2019; Dizolele, 2021; Wrong, 2021). As refugees, Tutsis suffered rejection by Obote, experienced massacres by Idi Amin's military in 1971–1979 and became accustomed to insecurity while sharpening their instincts to vigilance.

It was in this environment that Kagame would rise. Organized under the Rwanda Alliance for National Unity (RANU), they responded to the massacres by joining the host country's rebel movements and learnt military skills. Under the National Resistance Movement (NRM), Kagame and others rose to the ranks where they exploited training, equipment, and connections to transition from a helpless situation to one to be reckoned with (Mohamed, 2020). Following the untimely death of the top Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) leadership, he returned from the United States, capitalized on the Ugandan, Tanzanian, and American military tactics (Epstein, 2017; Marara, 2017) and with backing from Uganda (Epstein, 2017) successfully carried on the October 1, 1990, liberation war (Tasamba, 2021). With a disciplined military force, he was able to launch successful military attacks that brought to an end in July 1994 a 3-month genocide that had left 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus dead. His leadership and role in ending the genocide automatically put him at the top of a devastated nation amid accusations of having exacerbated the genocide with his RPF invasion. Kagame has remained a self-styled, personalistic leader (Rayarikar, 2017) committed to restoring Rwanda's past glory and challenged any one's moral right to level accusations against him or Rwanda (Epstein, 2017).

In the new administration of President Bizimungu, Kagame enjoyed considerable powers—serving dually as Vice president and Minister of Defense (Cascais, 2020). Having emerged in a hopeless political environment, with many of the natives displaced and traumatized and some of the perpetrators fighting for a return to the political table, the RPF fought to

restore the country's social and economic fabric and consolidate political legitimacy. Focusing on national rather than ethnic identities to unify the country, Kagame has rhetorically made clear Rwanda's common interest: "the common interests we have for a better future of this country are more important than any other interests, especially such interests as of different groups...and we say every Rwandan has the same opportunity to life, to the resources of this country, as the other" (Shiffman, 2008). His authority has stood unchallenged by anyone within the party and those against him were asked to leave (Rayarikar, 2017).

The tragic events of the genocide and the relegation of Rwanda to a failed state (Ruhumuliza, 2019) allowed Kagame to take a new approach to governance—trimming the institutions of democracy to consolidate power into his own hands while claiming it is necessary to fight the corrupt international elite. During the 2012 National Dialogue, for instance, Kagame rallied Rwandans against allegedly threatening external actors saying: *in the morning, they teach us about human rights, but they come back in the evening to take away your rights and you to do as they say* (Behuria, 2016, p. 12). To his favor, the international community's open acknowledgment of doing so little to end the genocide gave him an upper hand in dealing with Washington and the international community. For instance, in 1998, President Clinton admitted: *we did not act quickly enough after the killing began* (Gourevitch, 1998; Rayarikar, 2017). Many years later, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon lamented: *the organization is still ashamed of its conduct during the genocide* (Durmaz, 2019).

Interestingly, many, including some of his opponents, hold that if not for Kagame's visionary leadership, Rwanda would not have experienced many recent achievements (Rayarikar, 2017; Ruhumuliza, 2019; David, 2012). His character has been an important factor in Rwanda—commanding loyalty from the military and consistently steering the country toward ethnic integration and economic prosperity. For President Kagame, a combination of despair, trauma, and hopelessness among the survivors and a return to pre-colonial Rwandan values have combined to guarantee his ability to take the requisite populist actions, such as punishing and disciplining elites.

Under President Kagame, Rwanda has for example rewritten its tragic history using a rich cultural heritage in both tangible (natural heritage and Genocide memorialization) and intangible (such as *imivugo*—poems; folklore) forms (Bolin & Nkusi, 2022). Cultural heritage has served as an instrument of domestic unity and international repositioning using, for

instance, the Heritage Management Institutions (HMIs) for reframing aspects of Rwandan life, such as ethnicity, in positive ways (Bolin & Nkusi, 2022). Internationally, cultural heritage functions as a soft power approach in interstate relations—through heritage diplomacy such as mobilization of funds for heritage projects or heritage conservation (Bolin, 2021). For instance, using cultural heritage, the American Cultural Preservationists extended through the Department of State a grant focused on architectural conservation and training in conservation (Bolin, 2019). In the tourism sector, cultural heritage takes an international face with great potential for national economic development (Bolin & Nkusi, 2022). Away from the genocide, the country's foreign policy has been shaped by its dependence on foreign aid: Agaciro and use of military diplomacy for increased prestige. The next section discusses these factors while highlighting the international and national factors that have favored Kagame's rise as a populist leader.

Aid Economy and Rwanda's Populist Foreign Policy

Kagame is appreciated for not only changing the lives and chances of most ordinary Rwandans but also presiding over Rwanda as a benevolent and farsighted leader. Strategically combining welfare (for instance, key enterprises are controlled by the state while rural workers and agriculturalists are managed by the state through cooperatives overseen by loyal political cadres (BTI, 2022)) and capitalist economic policies, Rwanda's economy has steadily grown in comparison with the other East African countries (BTI, 2022; Cascais, 2020). Between 2008 and 2012, the Rwandan government claimed a remarkable economic growth at 8% (Sundaram, 2014). While the international community laments over mismanagement of donor funds in developing countries, Rwanda's story turned was unique—it restored hope after 50 years of development barrenness in Africa. This performance is linked to Kagame's strict oversight role in how donor aid is spent to avoid wastage (Rayarikar, 2017). With half of the budget coming from donors, Rwanda has been careful to maintain a flow of foreign assistance from development partners like the United States, Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Increased flow of development funds to Rwanda is equally related to the country's implementation of the liberal economic policies—Liberals hold that a nation's route to development is through foreign direct investment that in turn influences human employability and reduced government involvement in the market. Rwanda's commitment to the liberal

economic views is evident with the reception extended to foreign direct investors—the Mara Phone, the first smartphone to be produced in Africa is from Rwanda’s industrial park not far from the Volkswagen plant (Cascais, 2020). The entry of electronic investors in East Africa’s small country confirms a strong political commitment to turn a sad history into a successful one since 2000. Against these developments though, critics charge Rwanda adopted the development strategy of the East Asian countries that exposed the poor to greater economic difficulty (Behuria, 2016).

The IMF and World Bank, probably mindful of their alleged role in the genocide (Storey, 2001), have been lenient funders of aid for development in Rwanda (IMF & IDA, 2000). In 2000, Rwanda qualified as a beneficiary of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) funds worth US \$ 810M (IMF, 2020). With backing from the key global financial players, Rwanda has been able to revitalize its economy; Africa’s hilly nation opened its first maize factory, refurbished its national airline, improved its road network, and constructed facilities for air transport (BBC, 2017). These development indicators inform a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) just as they influence human development characterized by access to employment and resultantly, improved living conditions. Despite these developments, critics charge against the sustainability of a middle-income country due to the deficits in balance of payment, a heavy foreign debt, 40% under-employment of the labor force, and increased inequality between the rich and the poor (BTI, 2022). Notwithstanding, the country’s economic shifts have attracted the international community to Kagame as a *visionary leader* from Tony Blair; from Bill Clinton, *one of the greatest leaders of our time*; and Clare Short, *such a sweetie* (David, 2012).

As globalization ushers the world into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) characterized largely by internet use and information revolution, Rwanda has strategically positioned itself in Africa to benefit from the global changes. Portrayed to have the best and cheapest internet infrastructure with many government services online, Rwandans will benefit from increased efficiency, certainty, and security in an environment influenced by information flow for economic growth and job creation (Ndung’u & Signe, 2020). President Kagame’s commitment to an information society is underscored by his presence on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (BBC, 2017). The Kagame generation is an empowered, ambitious young people that stand freely from the prejudices that animated their parents (Ruhumuliza, 2019). In a continent where most leaders shut down social media platforms to limit the flow of information, Kagame’s love for information technology challenges those that criticize him as politically

intolerant. Yet, love for technological advancements comes with a concerning picture of what a government, determined to hunt down enemies, can do with cyber growth.

Access to information is not only an indicator of a country's development levels but also equally a key measurement aspect of democratic maturity. Kagame's commitment to an information society contradicts the view that he is an authoritarian leader (The Economist, 2021). Meantime, while the government's plan to develop the information and communications technology sector is on track, the government runs a military approach to information access through media censorship (Noorlander, 2010). Using Rwanda's *Law Relating to the punishment of the crime of genocide ideology*, many journalists have been forced to work in restrictive and abusive environments with many harassed by the military and security elements (Matthaei, 2014). Kagame's greatest focus on economic development has probably been his anti-corruption war. The RPF considered corruption as a predisposing factor for Rwanda's genocide, especially for its costs on service delivery that in 1998, in the *Kicukiro—II* meeting of the RPF, President Kagame threatened to *put his boots on and return to the bush to fight against the akazu* (Jones & Murray, 2018, p. 41). The country's zero tolerance to corruption with public officials vulnerable to dismissal at a slight transgression has been one great factor in attracting aid (Redifer et al., 2020). Rwanda's focus against corruption has been consistent that Transparency International's Index situated it at 102 in 2008; 89th in 2010; 66th in 2011; and 49th in 2012 (Ankomah, 2013). These efforts against the vice of corruption in Rwanda contrast sharply with neighboring Uganda where among top officials, corruption has been permitted to reinforce loyalty to the political leadership (Carbone, 2005).

Agaciro for Dignity and Self-reliance

The concept of *Agaciro* is recorded to mean dignity, self-respect, and self-worth (Mwambari, 2021; Behuria, 2016). In Rwanda, *Agaciro* has been used for several things: project a country's development strategy; mobilize Rwandans both at home and in the diaspora for self-reliance; maintain political stability (Behuria, 2016) and mobilize groups for memory purposes (Mwambari, 2021). Externally, *Agaciro* not only is connected to Rwanda's trade policy but also aids the government in meeting the indigenous needs and expectations (Bolin, 2021). In 2018, Rwanda, relying on the principle of dignity banned the importation of used clothing and footwear from the United States (Dahir & Kazeem, 2018). Like President

Trump's *America First* approach during his time, Kagame chose to prioritize Rwandans' interests. Unlike his counterparts from Uganda that did not phase-in a ban and Kenya that backtracked on the 2016 decision to ban the same, Rwanda did not heed to American threats to withdraw the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) benefits.

Agaciro has been used to re-activate the memories of Rwandans as a vulnerable nation. Through it, the government was able in 2012 to establish the *Agaciro Development Fund* (Handy, 2021; Behuria, 2016) following years of economic hardship after government had embraced neo-liberal economic policies and later, international community's withdrawal of foreign aid (Behuria, 2016). In response to the aid withdrawal, one of RPF members retorted; *we were worried but in many ways, we were prepared...we cannot rely on the goodwill of donors forever* (Behuria, 2016, p. 7). Basing on *Agaciro* principle of individual dignity, Rwandans were mobilized to take responsibility over their situations rather than rely on the government to support them. The creation of the fund was to instill in the population a sense of ownership, change of mindset of dependency and rebuilding of Rwandans' dignity (Behuria, 2016; Mwambari, 2021). Although there are arguments that those who contributed to the fund may have done so out of forced patriotism (most of the contributors were public servants), within a period after its establishment, a tune of 23.7b RwF had been realized (Behuria, 2016).

The *agaciro principle* also helps drive the government to pursue the principle of sovereignty. President Kagame has often made mention of his commitment to defending Rwanda against incursions—protecting its national territorial interests and human security while resisting pressures to implement democratic governance and civil rights. In his rule, President Kagame has shaped Rwanda's position in international politics not as a passive participant but actively involved—calling his people to be self-reliant while ensuring the principle of self-determination. *Agaciro* has also significantly influenced this nation-building and nation-positioning (Bolin, 2021).

Domestic and Global Security Interests

The stability witnessed in Rwanda is largely attributed to the President's unquestionable authority over internal security and foreign relations (Rayarikar, 2017). The country's internal peace is rooted in being an

active participant in neighboring countries' security situations. In comparison with the neighboring country of DRC where territories are often ungoverned or rebels take advantage of absence of rule of law and lack of government presence, Rwanda has no rebel groups based therein while incidents of violence are only a handful (BTI, 2022). In 2021, in praise of Kagame's public administration, Ashimwe wrote, your *journey of national liberation shared by vision, sacrifice and resilience has been inspiring to follow* (Ashimwe, 2021).

Rwanda has proactively used its involvement in multi-lateral and bilateral relations to shape its global image. It has strategically positioned itself as a continental security provider by sending troops to Mozambique, South Sudan, Darfur, and Central African Republic. This troop contribution speaks volumes about Rwanda's position at the UN Security Council in 2013–2014 where borrowing from the genocide experience pushed for humanitarian intervention in conflict-stricken countries. Although these deployments may be seen by critics as Rwanda's intent to become Africa's new police state, it may be necessary to appreciate them in light of Rwanda's wider foreign policy approach; political and economic strategies; military professionalism; political stability and brand Rwanda (Handy, 2021). The deployments confirm Kagame's military potential to stretch beyond immediate neighbors and the country's diplomatic capacity to broker deals with other African countries. For instance, the deployment in CAR came after a 2019 military cooperation agreement signed between Kigali and Bangui (Handy, 2021). Rwanda has a leader whom the global community has since regarded as competent and a better manager of security and public affairs compared to his African counterparts. Thus, as countries such as Uganda suffer scrutiny for deployment into countries like South Sudan, Rwanda is able to boost its international image and rely on military diplomacy as a tool to boost its project: *brand Rwanda*.

Similar to Museveni and to populists in Latin America that mostly focused on creating transnational solidarities for legitimacy purposes (Wajner, 2021), Kagame focused on regional integration. The Pan-Africanist became the first African leader to announce that from 2013 January, Africans would get a visa on arrival (Ankomah, 2013). This permission to Africans to move on the continent is key to deepening intra-African trade while brightening the prospects for regional integration based on the principles of mutual respect and beneficial cooperation

(Tasamba, 2021). Such efforts hide the destabilization created in neighboring DRC in the pursuit of genocidaires and the resultant insecurity in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Rwanda's military involvement in the DRC forced the donor community led by the United States to halt relations in 2013 on suspicion of Rwanda's support to M23, a rebel group condemned for its use of children as soldiers (Smith, 2013; Sundaram, 2014).

The above notwithstanding, when tasked with reforming the African Union, Rwanda considered results-delivery as critical for continental prosperity (BBC, 2017). During his Chairmanship of the African Union, the game-changing leader pushed for Continental Free Trade Areas (CFTA) that was signed in Kigali. Kagame has consistently called on African countries to avoid foreign entanglements by practicing the philosophy of *African Solutions to African Problems* (Soyinka, 2014). Rwanda has also been able to use its diplomatic stature to lobby for representation in international organizations—for instance, former Minister Louise Mushikiwabo and former National Bank of Rwanda Deputy Governor were elected to the positions of secretary-general of the Francophonie and the African Union Commission chair, respectively (Handy, 2021).

Rwanda's position on the international scene is unique—its security and economic strategies offer new perspectives, especially on how small-size countries can use their tangible and intangible assets to influence international relations for their benefit. President Kagame, despite his authoritarian and populist tendencies, is credited for turning the country's appalling history into an admired contemporary tale with backing from many members of the international community. As the country still navigates a traumatic political past, those that have known him as the only president may not comprehend how Rwanda would be without him. If prevention of a return of an ugly past coupled with service provision to the electorates informs a leader's hold to power, then President Kagame may have many years longer as a populist leader in Africa.

THE FUTURE OF POPULISM IN AFRICA: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS FROM EAST AFRICA

The foregoing analysis of the two populist leaders in East Africa has shown that populism as a political discourse and foreign policy strategy has taken firm roots in Africa. The common denominator of the two populist leaders is their military rise to power due to the political and historical crises in the two countries. Portraying themselves as visionary revolutionists, the two

have been considered messiahs that turned their ruined nations into peaceful and prosperous ones. Although colonial history has had some influence in the geopolitical realities of their countries, the post-colonial experiences have largely shaped their rise to political power. Moreover, the strategic actions and paths taken by both leaders, particularly their claims to embody the ordinary or true people against the corrupt elite, have clearly distinguished them as populist leaders in their own countries and in Africa.

President Museveni came to power with the promise to make a *fundamental change* in the politics and leadership of Uganda. He capitalized on the ruins of civil wars and collapsed constitutional order to rebuild a new Uganda. Similarly, President Kagame capitalized on a nasty genocide to preach forgiveness, reconciliation, unity, post-genocide reconstruction, and development through abolishing the ethnic-based identities. Such strategies have enabled both leaders and indeed many leaders in Africa to be considered irreplaceable despite the accusations of human rights violations and unfriendly interventionist policies in neighboring countries. Yet, the two have been keen enough to break from Africa's nationalist leaders' insights such as Nkrumah, Kaunda, or even Nyerere. Similar to populists in Latin America, Museveni and Kagame have promoted regional integration via their Pan-African initiatives, with the goal of providing regional autonomy in relation to external powers while achieving solutions to continental challenges.

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