

Populism in South Africa

An Analysis

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In 2016 and 2017, two years in a row, he was selected by Avance Media as 1 of 100 Most Influential Young South Africans, under the Social Enterprise and Philanthropy category, and Law and Governance category.

Summary

In recent years, political science scholars have studied populism trends around the globe. The general consensus amongst political science scholars is that populism is the product of failure of political leaders to address the needs of the people. Globalisation has been a major contributor in the rise of populism in developed countries.

South Africa is not immune to the tide of populism that has been rising in open, democratic societies.

South Africa's economy has performed poorly over the past decade and a half, with very low economic growth, and rising unemployment. Because of these economic challenges, South Africa has become a fertile ground for left-wing populists.

This paper analyses the trends of populism in South Africa in comparison to populism in other regions around the world. The paper concludes that there are similarities in the drivers of populism in South Africa, Latin America, Europe, and United States of America.

Introduction

There has been a wave of populism in developed and developing nations over the past twenty-five years. It has reshaped the political engagement in the affected nations and transformed the nature of political discourse.

A lot has been written about populism – and the term has become popular in public debates. For the purposes of this paper, it's important to define populism. Berman defines populism as a “political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the “us” refers to the “people,” defined often in ethnic or communal terms and seen as engaged in a zero-sum battle with “them,” defined most often as liberal elites, the establishment, and minorities and/or immigrants.”¹

Another characteristic of populists is that they portray themselves as democratic. They parrot the notion that the current political setting is against “the people”, Berman writes. Populists also detest democratic institutions along with the norms safeguarded by these institutions. These norms include freedom of the media, free speech, the tolerance of opposition politics, and constraints on the executive.

In Latin America, Europe, and the United States, populists have disrupted political arenas, reshaped governance.

In South Africa, populism has manifested itself in four socioeconomic issues: the cost of higher education, healthcare issues, immigration, and land reform. Populist politicians have offered left-wing, radical unsustainable solutions to these socioeconomic issues.

Discussion

Over the past forty years, globalisation has been instrumental in reducing poverty and conflicts around the world. However, the world still faces challenges – as shown by conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa, Haiti, Myanmar.² These conflicts affect us all, though to varying degrees.

Because of globalisation, the Ukraine-Russia war has been a contributor to the sky-high inflation rates we have endured worldwide in recent years.³ Globalisation has also resulted in a wave of migrations that are reshaping nations over the years.⁴

According to Berman, populism has been on the rise in many developed countries. Fukuyama argued that globalisation triggered populism in the developed world.⁵ The argument that globalisation has been the trigger of populism has been supported by some scholars. Swank and Betz studied 16 nations in Europe and found a positive correlation between economic openness and votes for populist political parties in cases where social spending is low. Where social spending is high, the correlation was opposite.⁶

According to Dippel et al., the stronger trade relations between China and Eastern Europe resulted in the rise in support for populist political parties in Germany.⁷ Colantone and Stanig came to the same conclusion when their research showed that, in 15 Western European countries, imports from China have bolstered support for nationalist parties that believe in isolationism.⁸ In a separate but related research, both authors found that the support for Brexit was bigger in places that had been heavily affected by economic globalisation.⁹ Brexit was one of the fundamental shifts in Europe over the past decades. Amongst the issues for Brexiters was immigration, which was something that British voters thought the EU got wrong.¹⁰

In France, Marine Le Pen's far-right, populist National Rally has become a political force. During the European parliament elections in June 2024, National Rally won almost 30% of the vote.¹¹ This was higher than France's presidential party. In French legislative elections in June and July 2024, the National Rally won on votes but was third in terms of seats, due to the French voting process. The National Rally is reshaping the French political landscape.¹²

Germany has faced similar dynamics with respect to immigration, with the government facing enormous challenges at the polls. The populist Alternative for Germany is also reshaping German politics. It won regional elections in September 2024.¹³

In the United States of America, Trump's populist politics in 2016 focused on assigning blame to Hispanics and immigrants for America's problems. Trump was anti-establishment and opposed to Republican political orthodoxy. This view is supported by Berman who argues that Trump emphasised identity and immigration issues in his political career.¹⁴ In this year's US election, immigration was one of the very big issues. Donald Trump won the election on broken borders platform. Trump has been very good

in exploiting America's immigration problems. He was able to tie border problems to Joe Biden's administration. It was a winning formula for Trump's campaign.¹⁵

Latin America has also been known for waves of populism over the years. According to Edwards, Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro presidencies and the Kirchners' rule in Argentina, are the well-known recent populist episodes in the Latin America region.¹⁶

Like in other regions around the world, populism in Latin America was triggered by the dire economic conditions. Take, for example, Venezuela. Hugo Chavez's populist policies were adopted after Venezuela endured a series of economic crises, and the failure of International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs.¹⁷ In Argentina, Nestor Kirchner took power in May 2003 following the country's banking and currency crisis that took place from 2001 to 2002. Austerity by the IMF was introduced during this period. This caused discontent in Argentina, resulting in the flourishing of populism that led to the rise to power of Nestor Kirchner.¹⁸

What about populism in South Africa?

Some scholars have characterised the far-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) as populist in South Africa. Mbete argues that the EFF is a populist political party as its rhetoric has sparked a debate on the relevance of South Africa's political institutions decades into the country's democracy.¹⁹ Corrigan points to South Africa's Former President Jacob Zuma, and Julius Malema, as modern populists in South Africa.²⁰ However, "the people" concept widely used by South African populists can be traced back to the apartheid era. The term cemented the sense of "us and them" and was carried over to the democratic South Africa. De Jager & Nyenhuis argue that the EFF is a populist party that campaigns on ethnicity and racialises every aspect of political discourse.²¹ The new Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party, founded in September 2023 by Jacob Zuma, is also a left-wing populist movement whose mission is race-based statism.²²

The triggers of populism in South Africa should be viewed within an African context. Africa remains the poorest region in the world. Given this reality of poverty and mismanagement of governance by African leaders, the continent is one of the most unstable regions in the world. Most military coups over the past 50 years have taken place in Africa, which is unfortunate.²³ Currently, nations like Sudan are trapped in conflicts that have resulted in thousands of people being displaced and killed.²⁴ The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is also mired in conflict between the government forces and M23 rebels.

The surge of populism in South Africa is proof that the "Rainbow Nation" envisaged by South Africa's first democratic president Nelson Mandela, faces predicaments.²⁵ The ANC's ineffective policy programs over the past thirty years of South Africa's democracy has produced conditions for the rise of populism in South Africa.²⁶

The Drivers of Populism in South Africa

Like other African countries, South Africa faces its own challenges, from poverty to crime. The joblessness crisis is causing serious harm to the country.

On crime, South Africa ranks in the top ten in the world.²⁷ Blackouts over the past years repressed economic growth and destroyed jobs. With these socioeconomic challenges, populist politicians have emerged in the political arena promising radical solutions to South Africa's socioeconomic problems. These populists advocate huge state intervention in the economy. Much of what they propose as solutions is counterproductive for economies and societies over the long term.

Higher education has been one of the drivers of populism in South Africa. South Africa's higher education is very expensive, and many people, especially the disadvantaged cannot afford it.²⁸

This high cost of education has caused South African politicians to be populist about the issue. Under the Zuma administration, back in 2017, higher education was made free for the poor.²⁹ This has placed pressure on South Africa's fiscus and caused funding problems for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).³⁰ Some politicians have asserted that higher education should be entirely free, which would be more damaging to South Africa's fiscus. Free higher education for all is a populist idea advocated by far left-wing South African political parties.

The National Health Insurance (NHI) – which is basically socialised healthcare – is another populist policy that will damage South Africa. NHI will be a very expensive program - a program that the government cannot afford, yet is pursuing it nevertheless. According to Momentum Health Solutions, NHI will cost more than R1.3 trillion. The government has no concrete plan on how this NHI will be financed (NHI).³¹ The justification for NHI by the ANC government has been that every South African should have equal access to same quality healthcare.³² Instead of focusing on fixing the current government health care, the ANC government wants to constrain and suppress the private healthcare sector with NHI.

Free government healthcare already exists, and South African taxpayers pay a lot for it. Currently, healthcare expenditure is 8.5% of South Africa's GDP.³³ A thriving private healthcare is needed in South Africa to create jobs and encourage innovation. Besides that, South African citizens should have options in the market. A stronger private healthcare sector is good for the country, as it can be a backup when the public sector struggles. Its higher rate of productivity can help the government with tax revenues that can be used to finance economic development.

In Canada, universal health care coverage faces enormous challenges, with the system overwhelmed and waiting times for medical treatment shockingly high.³⁴ In the United Kingdom, similar trends are taking place.³⁵

The waiting periods for medical operations in government healthcare are much longer. These problems are an indicator on how the NHI proposal is a populist idea. This NHI proposal is popular amongst left-wing political parties - from the EFF to the MK Party and some elements of the ANC. Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana understands that the South African government should rather focus on fixing the current public health care.³⁶ The costs in the private sector can be suppressed by stronger competition.

Land reform has been one of the issues in politics in recent years. To attempt to address the issues of land ownership, expropriation of land without compensation has been advocated by left-wing, populist parties. Expropriation of land without compensation does not empower the disadvantaged in South Africa, since it's about the government taking over land without compensation. It is a program of increased government control.³⁷ The surveys of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) have shown that most South African land claimants have opted to take financial compensation and not land over the past 25 years of South Africa's restitution process.³⁸ Land is not a priority for South Africans, yet populists have made it a big issue. South Africans want jobs, employment opportunities, and good service delivery. Afrobarometer surveys also show that land reform is not the top priority amongst South Africans.³⁹

The land reform matter needs to be addressed in a cautious manner, as it can cause uncertainty in the property industry. Land Reform can take place and must take place. However, the land reform that is pursued must be land reform that respects and upholds human rights. South Africa has millions of people without title deeds and need to be empowered through the land restitution process. If these people were to have their title deeds, they would be able to be productive participants in the market; transact on and renovate the land. This would be the sustainable way to address land reform in South Africa. Instead of proposing sensible, sustainable policies on land reform, populist rhetoric on land reform has been off the charts in South Africa in recent years.⁴⁰

South Africa's illegal immigration problems highlight the failure of the ANC government to maintain and secure borders over the past thirty years. This failure has created an environment where immigrants have become a scapegoat in a manner that fuels divisions in South Africa. Populist political leaders have made immigrants a scapegoat for South Africa's problems.⁴¹

Skilled immigrants can help South Africa revamp its economy. South Africa lags on global competitiveness. According to the Institute for Management Development (IMD), South Africa ranks in the bottom ten of the IMD Index.⁴² This is one of the reasons why South Africa is outperformed by other emerging markets on economic growth.

Unemployment is also an issue that has fuelled populism in South Africa. South Africa's official unemployment rate is 32.1% with Black South Africans the worst affected (36%).⁴³ The driver of South Africa's unemployment rate is weak economic growth. This growth issue has affected South Africans for almost 20 years. Populists have promised radical left-wing policies to address the issues of unemployment.⁴⁴

Nationalisations have been proposed by the EFF and MK Party to address the problems of unemployment and poverty. But nationalisation is as populist as ever, since it does not work to address socioeconomic challenges. Nationalizations are costly, as state-owned companies are shielded from competition and often have to be bailed out by taxpayers' money. They also tend to be the drivers of corruption. The state-capture is one issue that highlighted how corruption can flourish in South Africa's SOEs.

South Africa's unemployment is the highest in the world. Populists have managed to pit South Africans against each other. Minorities are being blamed for the problems of the majority.

Population growth has surpassed economic growth over the years. This means that South Africans have gotten poorer. South Africa's challenges need honest leaders who will offer sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

Populism is certainly reshaping democratic, open societies around the world. From the discussion above, the conclusion is that the drivers of populism in South Africa and in other regions around the world overlap. The socioeconomic challenges that these societies face have created fertile ground for populists.

The effects of globalization can be felt both in developed and in developing nations. Immigration seems to be a common feature in Western countries where populism has gained traction. South Africa faces similar trends as well on immigration. It is critical to not dismiss the concerns of the people. Much of the problems that societies grieve about can be attributed to the incompetence of political leaders. Hence, people are now voting for populists.

South Africa's socioeconomic problems cannot be addressed overnight. Over the past decades, the EFF has managed to mobilize support on the premise of populist rhetoric. The MK Party seems to be following the same approach of populist politics. Both political parties advocate for excessive state interventions in the economy.

The populism of the MK Party is not surprising. Jacob Zuma adopted populist positions when he was president of the ANC and of South Africa.

When exactly democratic nations will recover from the populist waves is not clear. In the case of South Africa, populism will continue to rear its ugly head if the challenges of poverty are not addressed with pro-market, pro-growth policies. These challenges can be addressed. The new Government of National Unity (GNU) will need to address these issues speedily.

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