



Shaking up Africa's long-entrenched rulers

African leaders, who have held on to their power for decades, are being forced from power – not by revolution or coups d'état but by a continent-wide desire for more democratic leadership. None of the old guard wants to go, but some are showing foresight and setting the terms of their departure.

By James Hall

Africa is witnessing an unprecedented departure of old guard despots. Men who have held tight the reins of power for decades are on their way out. The Presidents-for-Life have retained their positions by corrupting constitutions and stage-managing elections, while using their national

treasuries as personal banks and enriching their families through their nation's resources. Some of these rulers are inheritors of family dynasties, while others are once-respected liberation leaders, corrupted by power into thinking they are indispensable.

Country leaders change slowly in Africa, where sudden change is usually through extra-legal means, like coups d'état. Elections are mostly predetermined in one-party states, and the ruler in charge also has the legislature and judiciary under his control.



A presidential election billboard in Serekunda, The Gambia. Having suffered defeat in the December 2016 elections, Jammeh finally stepped down in January 2017 in the face of mounting regional and international pressure.

Photo courtesy Sachara/Wikimedia Commons



On 1 November 2014, Lieutenant-Colonel Zida announces to demonstrators that Blaise Compaoré has agreed to step down, 27 years after taking power in a military coup d'état.

Photo courtesy Thomas Leger/Flickr

Despite these obstacles, Africans have used their ballots to vote in new leadership. As The Gambia's Yahya Jammeh showed by refusing to accept his 1 December 2016 election defeat and creating a regional crisis, some dictators are not willing to go. But popular will seems unstoppable. Even the most entrenched of the Old Guard are reading the writing on the wall and making arrangements to leave office before they are ignominiously pushed out. Jammeh is now the guest of Equatorial Guinea's dictator Teodoro Obiang, who might be wondering how long he will be able to counter the rise in democracy.

Popular will ousts rulers from East through Central to West Africa

For decades, no one dared challenge Africa's dictators except through the only means possible: violent ouster. Once in power these presidents stifled civil liberties and opposition parties, and seemed immovable. Political observers were therefore surprised

on 31 October 2014, when the people of Burkina Faso rose up in violent protest against President Blaise Compaoré. The corrupt, oppressive leader had been in power for 27 years. His announced intention to continue in office sparked a realisation among the citizenry that they were no longer willing to live under his rule. At first resisting his removal, Compaoré soon departed at the urging of the military. For Africa, Burkina Faso posed the question of whether the popular uprising was an anomaly or a template for other Africans to follow. Along with the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that retired several North African despots, Burkina Faso proved the start of a trend.

Jammeh, The Gambia's erratic ruler, was also brought down by popular will. As the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) created an armed response, supported by a UN vote encouraging ECOWAS's efforts to oust Jammeh. On 19 January 2017, when election winner Adama Barrow took the oath of office in Senegal and ECOWAS

entered The Gambia with jets and troops, the dictator's end was irreversible. Jammeh's situation was monitored by some other African despots and likely contributed to their decisions to plan their own exits.

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For decades, the norm has been for presidential incumbents to win re-elections, usually in perpetuity. A week after The Gambia's election on 1 December 2016, Ghanaians voted President John Mahama out of office. Ghana is West Africa's most stable country and the quick, peaceful transfer of power was comforting to Africa's pro-democracy advocates, as was the further evidence of the eroding electoral invincibility of incumbent presidents.



Only the demise of the increasingly frail Robert Mugabe will bring a change in leadership to Zimbabwe. **Above:** A faded and tattered image of Robert Mugabe on an old election poster is an apt reminder of the ageing autocrat's dwindling power. **Below:** Mugabe (left) rests during the state funeral of the late Zambian president, Michael Sata, in 2014.



Photos courtesy Kevin Walsh/Flickr; GovernmentZA/Flickr

For every Mahama, there is a Kagame, Rwanda's president whose ruling party leveraged popular support to execute a constitutional coup d'état that allows Kagame to remain in power for years to come. However, a similar effort by Burundi's Pierre Nkurunziza allowed him to stay in office but resulted in civil war and a massive refugee exodus as Burundians showed disapproval and fear of his rule. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was poised to also descend into civil war when Joseph Kabila sought to change the constitution to extend his family's hold on the presidency that spanned three decades. This time the ruler was thwarted by civilian street demonstrations, a revitalised political opposition, DRC churches and NGOs, as well as an international community desperate for stability in the country. After church-led talks that showed Kabila could not get away with a power grab, on 30 December 2016 he agreed to step down after elections that will be held in late 2017.

Two former liberation leaders-turned-despots see their final days in Southern Africa

Kabila's acceptance of the inevitable seemed to be shared by at least one of Africa's longest-ruling despots, Angola's President-for-Life José Eduardo dos Santos. Upon the death in 1979 of Angola's first leader, Agostinho Neto, with whom dos Santos served in the liberation struggle, he assumed a presidency that he never relinquished. For 38 years, he has used Angola's oil revenues to make his family fabulously wealthy. However, the mood of the perpetually impoverished Angolan people cannot be ignored in an age of social media and opinion polling. Having long overstayed his welcome, dos Santos had state radio announce on 2 December 2016

that he would step down after the elections in 2017, when he will be 75. In March 2016, he had hinted at retirement in 2018; the accelerated pace of political reform in Africa is probably convincing him to leave earlier and on his own terms, the way Kabila is doing in DRC. Thus, Southern Africa will see the end of the founder of one of its most corrupt autocracies.

Retirement is not being considered by Zimbabwe's President-for-Life Robert Mugabe, who, at 93, makes dos Santos appear youthful by comparison. The liberation leader has destroyed the country's once thriving economy through policies that seemed founded on political and racial revenge rather than practical nation-building measures. Mugabe's role in the deaths of 20,000 Matabeleland followers of a rival politician, who were massacred in the 1980s, has long tainted his rule. For this particular despot whose control of the military ensures he will have no trouble from the people of Zimbabwe, mortality will be the only bringer of change. Mugabe literally stumbled through 2016, becoming increasingly frail. An ongoing power struggle among officials in his ruling party who wish to be Zimbabwe's next ruler shows the rest of government is

anticipating Mugabe's demise.

Changing leadership encourages democracy and social advances

Autocracies encourage corruption at the expense of national development and stifle creativity needed to boost economies. The trend at the start of 2017 toward retiring dictators will liberate oppressed people whose health and social services will improve as these services receive treasury funds currently routed to despots' bank accounts and the militaries that have kept them in power. The longer a ruler is in office, the more his country deteriorates. Afro-optimists have reason to be encouraged by the African people's desire to retire the rulers under whom they once lived in fear.

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Angola's dos Santos, DRC's Kabila and The Gambia's Jammeh are just three autocrats whose hold on power once seemed insurmountable. A continent-wide popular desire for democratic reform is retiring despots at an accelerating rate.

Key points:

- *The fall of The Gambia's Jammeh proved that a despot can no longer ignore the will of his oppressed people who have the support of an international community willing to act on their behalf*
- *Understanding new popular sentiment, Angola's dos Santos and the DRC's Kabila have now agreed to step down from power*
- *Several old-guard tyrants still rule in Africa, such as Zimbabwe's Mugabe, and if only mortality can put an end to their power the advancing age of these men assures political change*

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