

**POLITICAL POPULISM IN AFRICA: A CHALLENGE OF NATION BUILDING: A
COMPARATIVE VIEW OF NIGERIA AND GHANA.**

Abstract

Political populism has become globally ubiquitous, every electoral season exacerbates the incidence of populism, obviously within West African sub region, populism has become a challenging phenomenon, this study focuses on the manifestation of populism in Nigeria and Ghana (2020 – 2025) and critically interrogates how populist political actions intersects with ethnic chauvinism, scapegoating and conflict, further examined how political actors deploys populist instruments for political mobilisation and latching on ethnic, religious, anti-establishment, anti-corruption mantra between Nigeria and Ghana to muster support, a development that presents critical challenge to national diversity, nation building, and democratic consolidation in both countries. Ghana has overtimes through consistent democratic process moderated the rate of populism, while Nigeria's political populism stems from its multicultural and ethnic diversity. The study adopted the qualitative method; and relied on secondary and primary sources of data. For a theoretical background: the study adopted an eclectic theoretical approach by integrating the Social constructivist theory and Instrumental theory to analyse populism and its effect on nation building and drawing a comparative analysis between Nigeria and Ghana. The study interrogated the etymology of political populism and demonstrated how ethnic nationalism, identity, could drive populist political tendencies, the paper relied on unstructured field interviews, secondary literature to draw a comparative qualitative analysis in explaining the persistent political populism manifesting in these two important countries of Africa and the sub region. The research demonstrated the impact of political populism on ethnic diversity, nation building and social cohesion and concludes by proffering ethnic equity, good governance, free and credible electoral process as a veritable approach to policy makers in stemming the debilitating nature of conflict ravaging the global community in general and the African continent in particular.

KEY WORDS: political populism, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethnicity, Ethnic equity and Nation building.

INTRODUCTION

Political populism remains a topical global political discourse a phenomenon that have attracted the attention of scholars across academic spheres and ideological persuasions, notably scholars of populist orientation bears divergent postulations in their attempt to conceptualise political populism globally. Among the most prominent of North American social scientists to address populist politics from this tradition of social inquiry were Shils (1956) and Lipset (1955). Both scholars basically depicted it as a menace to democratic life in the United States. However in the contrary Nuggent posits that populism is not only positive but represents the attempt to defend the interests of the less privileged within the democratic community, (Nuggent, 2019), meanwhile from the views of Shils and lipset in the USA, such a development is evident in the emergence of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders as viable presidential candidates against the wishes of the establishment of their respective political parties, they exemplified populism's recourse to xenophobia, isolationism, political irrationality and ethnophobia in the case of Africa, these political actors had their major policies such as building a wall on the United States and Mexican border. Such a thought has been evident in Europe as well as in Australia, where the debate about immigration pervades with highly xenophobic views and have become socially acceptable, especially as they pertain to the people of colour (Yilmaz, 2012).

This study however is predicated on the exacerbating development of ethnic driven political populism emerging in Africa: Nigeria and Ghana precisely and its concomitant challenge to nation building, populism depicts the profound social, political and economic manifestation that occurred in Africa after the colonialbulkanisationof 1884- 85, these led to a type of economic, political, and cultural modernisation. Interestingly, however populism has demonstrated incredibly that those occupying different social class positions could be unified by common discomfort of social processes that have kept them at the periphery by the failure of the structural system: Economic, Political or social systems failure to meet public, social demands, through rising unemployment and income insecurity, declining trust in the public institutions this will lead to distress, political polarisation and populism will occur (World Bank, 2010)

Populist tools may be dynamically effective when premised on nationalist sentiment, ethnic solidarity or religious identity, or combinations of all as it is in the case of Africa: Nigeria and Ghana to be precise. Fundamentally, the presentday resurgence of populist politics in Africa

can be seen as however a product of wide-ranging and deep-seated social distress across the states of Africa, accessioned by a perennial political and economic exclusion evolving within post-liberal democracy of the West, signs of this discomfort have been highlighted in the aftermath of the most recent global economic crisis of 2007 - 2009 described by scholars as the most severe economic depressions since the great depression emanating from the United States and spread globally, with grievous impact as job loss, GDP contraction across the continent and the Sub Region, decline in global trade, lost of house hold savings, (Algan et al, 2017 & Sulker and Basu, 2013) global financial crises, poor governance and complaints of ethnic marginalisation especially in Nigeria, where traditionally dominant political parties have been challenged recently with populist phenomenon, whether emanating externally or internally (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), thereby deeply affecting the sorts of ideas and agenda that become normalised in the national political discourse, this influences the conversation about the premature integration of Africa into the global capitalist system and its attendant consequence.

Further populist resurgence is commonly tied to discontent with the political system: power sharing and resources distribution that appear to preserve and entrench prevailing ethnic and class structures, it is notable that populism often becomes closely intertwined with expressions of identity politics, ethnic nationalism, that can develop highly discriminative characteristics within African context, insofar as the understanding of the people is constructed against a host of perceived foes made up of possible exploiters and oppressors. For an instance the Igbo phobia expressed in Lagos during and after 2023 general elections, Such constructions always make use of a pool of symbolic resources that are culturally specific in order to be meaningful in a given context (Anderson, 2009).

Thus, populist mobilisations may be variously effective when premised on nationalist bias or sentiments, ethnic solidarity or religious identity, or different combinations of these.*** Against such a background, and in a fundamental sense, the present-day resurgence of populist politics in Africa, can be seen as no less than a symptom of wide-ranging and deep-seated social distress across African societies evolving within post-liberal, socialist and post-colonialist contexts. It depicts signs of distress amplified in the aftermath of the most recent global financial crisis as adumbrated above, this development sustains populist manifestations.

Empirical examples of populist manifestations are Lula, regarded as one of the most influential Labour movement leaders that metamorphosed into national populist politics, his influence on trade union movements in Brazil that incorporated a form of left wing Labour oriented populism based in class struggle, union mobilisation and working class identity (de Castro, 2013, Bourne, 2008; Edwards, 2010), In Indonesia, on the other hand, the legacy of civil society dissatisfaction provide an historical impediment to successful populist movements because it has contributed to the difficulty in kick-starting effective political and organisational machinery at the grassroots level, (Hefner, 2001 &Aspinall, Mietzner, 2010).

Africa presents specially a challenging case for a precise explanation of populism due to the predominance of strongmen political actors and the lack of ideology fundamental to many political parties.

The fundamental nature of populism given the longstanding absence of institutionalised political parties prevalent in Africa precisely and the attendant ***prominence of political actors, lack of internal democracy, absence of rule of law has been facilitated by the dominance of presidential systems with strong executive powers gives credence to populist tendencies (Cheibub, 2007, Cheibub&Limongi, 2002, Van de Walle, 2003)

Pointedly, populism is present only when it manifests as a political strategy, supported by certain ideological mantra and sociocultural manifestations. Many distinct African politicians, both democratic and authoritarian regimes (military) covering both incumbent and opposition leaders, and referring to varying electoral activities such as Pre-electoral handouts, campaign actions or mantra in Nigeria and as well as in Ghana, xenophobic discourse, ethnocentric rhetoric, intrinsic appeals, and declarations of economic goals have all been considered as signs of populism.

This study focuses on populism as ultimately a political strategy based on conducts of political actors forging popular vote, diverse and unorganised constituency for Political mobilisation, this political strategy relies on individual politicians who seek to augment their power and autonomy and who depend on mobilising a large majority of the population, a scene that presented in Lagos Nigeria and Ghana's presidential elections in 2020 and 2023 respectively, Ostiguy perspective captures this view by stressing that populism essentially revolves around sociocultural performances, including what he termed "the flaunting of the

low.” he posits that populism manifests itself politically through cultural symbols, emotional expression and language by presenting the markers; through informed speech, emotional appeal and anti elite mantra to gain political support of the ordinary people ,(Ostiguy, 2017), In his study high and low political divide Such performances may rely on the use of popular, coarse, accessible, and sometimes vulgar language, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Donald Trump, Juan Peron, the Monkeys as bandied around Nigeria by a government official and dramatic colorful, and even politically incorrect acts that grab the public’s attention, ” this is our turn” mantra during 2023 presidential election in Nigeria (Mudde, 2004) instead suggests an ideological approach in which populism revolves, around a discourse that differentiates the corrupt elite, the pure people, “the owners of the land”, “this is our own” and the general will.

Populism is dependent on individualistic leadership with it linkages to the down pressed of the society, politically and economically marginalised, supported by sociocultural performances and an inclusive ideology of the people versus the elite, are most useful for determining cases of contemporary populist strategies in African democracies.

African populism emerged as a consequence of coups in the 1980s that were justified by military leaders as the only means of ousting corrupt incumbents who had exacerbated general economic mismanagement and undermined citizens’ welfare (Chazanetal. 1999, Nuggent, 2004), in 1981 in Ghana when Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings ousted the civilian government of HillaLinmann in a popular coup. Ideologically, he adopted the need for a social revolution, entreating Ghanaians to rise against exploitation, premising that his goal was to provide a space for the people to engage in the decision-making process (Rothchild&Boadi, 1989). This study aimed to evolve a formidable strategy for political stability and sustainable nation building approach in Africans multicultural society by interrogating the etymology of global populism and how it mutates and intersects with democracy; the effect of populism on nation building in Africa, the impact of political, economic and ethnic equity as a veritable tool in nation building and political stability and how ethnic nationalism accounts for the persistence and escalation of ethnic conflict. With a view to achieving the aforementioned objectives, the study was guided by the following questions: what is the historical antecedents of populism in Africa; what is the effect of political populism in terms of nation building in Africa; how does social, economic and political equity influenced the political stability and peace process? And how does ethnic

nationalism account for the persistent escalation of ethnic conflict present in Africa? The study adopted a qualitative approach and relied on secondary and primary sources of data. While the secondary data was gathered through the use of extant literature that bears relevance to the study; the primary data was gathered through indepth interviews. And to theoretically locate political populism, the study used the social constructivists and the instrumentalists theory. The introduction of the second theory became prominent by the need to fill in the gap identified in the first theory by explaining the weaponisation of populism within African political system

The study is a robust contribution to the existing body of knowledge especially with regards to intractable conflicts occasioned by antecedents of political actors, by promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; providing access to justice for all, and building effective united nation. Given the consequences associated with ethnic conflict such as human rights violations, genocide, and others that undoubtedly pose a threat to continental and regional peace.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Populism is a complex and dynamic concept rooted in the historical, cultural and social dimensions of human existence. Within the academic discourse, populism within the context of African political realm is often framed as a sociological construct defined by factors such as language, religion, nationality and cultural practices. The theoretical underpinning employed for this study aims to provide a comprehensive and suitable framework for situating the study within the context of Populist politics and patterns in relation to the democratisation process in Nigeria and Ghana given the dynamic nature of the problem, the study shall be adopting an integrated theoretical framework. The goal is to push for an eclectic approach in understanding populist politics and voting patterns in Nigeria and Ghana. These theories include social constructivists theory and instrumentalists theory.

Social Constructivist Theory

The proponent of this theory was John Dewey. Its approach is a social construct, meaning that ethnic populism is something that is constructed. It is more of a reaction to changing social environment (Phillip, 2000) and reinforced by social norms and cultural practices. The theory posits that populism driven by ethnic nationalism is not fixed, not primordial in nature, but flexible or changeable (Phillip, 2000). Populism agreeably is dynamic and a complex phenomenon, constructed, and expressed. With this method, the emphasis moved from characterising ethnic drive to creating it, by deploying populist materials. The constructionist approach, which sees populism as a social construct, is based on instrumentalist theories. In this region populism is constantly and eternally formed through social interactions between the elite and the common person. For the single purpose of capturing power and perpetuating same, Immigration (The United States) colonialism (Africa) and conquest are all processes that contribute to the formation of populist manifestations (Wimmer, 2008). Ethnic populist identity is shaped by political, social, and economic factors. Moreover, Brass and other constructivist scholars argue that political elites use each society's historically produced narrative in order to increase their own power (Brass, 1976).

Whether or not ethnic nationalists are created, ethnic groups typically share an enduring common bond of interest and identity based on shared historical experiences which are incorporated and integrated in such a way that they have significant meaning for a particular ethnic group and elicit the same emotions as primordial identities (Amoo and Alliu, 2024). Thus, the fundamental consequences of ethnic belonging as experienced by the populace as well as the elite's intentional manipulation of political power though often provide the basis for most of the ethnic tension and conflicts common in multi-ethnic societies. Politicians in Nigeria and Ghana frequently use this strategy to create ethnic identities, and for political mobilisations in order to categorise people, as owners of the land versus the strangers as opposed to their cultural identities.

By examining historical events and processes, the constructivist method focuses on the potential causes and sources of ethnic conflict and shows how the political and socioeconomic environments influence the genesis of ethnic violence. It is significant for this argument because it emphasises the role of elite influence and the socioeconomic and political context in understanding how ethnic tension and populist antagonism are ignited for selfish ends, in

Nigeria and Ghana, for an instance the popular ‘emilokon and Nigeria must go in Ghana’ are attempt to influence political outcomes in their various counties (field work response, 2025)

Instrumentalist Theory

The proponents of instrumentalists approach, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan infer that elites create ethnic tensions and in some cases, inadvertently provoke it in a manner that could incite violence as a strategy to cease power, or protect their existing authority or defend against group threat (Fearon&Laitin, 2000, Kaufman, 2005). This theory had been criticised for being insensitive to other possible causes of ethnic conflicts or political violence. However, such criticism is too feeble to whittle-down the critical position of the theory in explaining the weaponisation of populist ethnic actions for the capture of political power or strategic option for state officials to secure block votes. This theory will be pivotal in interrogating ethnic driven political populism, as an instrument or tool for political or personal aggrandisement. Also, how moral and material support provided by ethnic networks for political gains shaped ethnic block voting (Ports & Barchs, 1985).

Instrumental theory as a political strategy for political and ethnic mobilisation, articulating and advancing group interests, implies that ethnic groups are driven by interests and for negotiations demanding comparative advantage, which implies that the scope, viability and the basis of ethnic identity are determined by and used to serve the economic and general class interest; this implies that individual interest is a major driver in ethnicity, who gets what, when and how. Another strand of instrumentalist theory is the rational choice approach, which suggest that ethnic actors are rational actors who deployed ethnic driven populist tactics for their political advantage, to shape voter’s behaviour who are themselves rational thinkers to demonstrate a particular voting behaviour because of their pecuniary interest, the theory will in particular explain the reason why non state actors violently wade into the conduct of the 2023 elections flaunting strands of ethnic provoking populist actions, example Oluomo’s threat to other ethnic groups in Lagos presidential and gubernatorial elections and ‘‘Nigeria must go’’ campaign in Ghana and ‘‘it is our own’’ campaign slogan used by Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party(LP) and how they influenced the 2023 electoral outcomes in Nigeria and the Nigeria must go campaign in Ghana triggered by Hassan Ayariga of the All Peoples Congress(APC) Ghana. (Kisseh, 2025)

Considering the dynamism and complex nature of populism, the two theoretical postulations, constructivist and instrumentalist theories form an eclectic lens useful for this study to understand the re surging phenomenon of populism driven by ethnicity are influencing nation building in Nigeria and Ghana. The integration and combination of theories offers deeper insight for understanding how and why political populism is re surging in a dimension that has consequence for the countries nation building process.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

POPULISM

The term populism originates from the Latin word *populus*, meaning the people. Populism underlying the concerns, emotions and interests of the general populace, or so called ordinary people or collective body of citizenry, that emerged in the Peoples Party, so the members of the Peoples party are the populists, while it sets the people against the elite, by constructing politics as a struggle between us the people, and the elite, (Canovan, 1999). It is a dynamic instrument, that weaponises the masses through charismatic political leadership, using rhetoric, and the narrative of representing the voice of the people against entrenched power structures. This dynamics is often exploited by populists, who rally support by exploiting and exploring grievances and fears for an advantage. As noted by Lazar in his two step flow of communication, (Lars, 1944, West & Turner, 2017) populism frequently manifests as movements or leaders who depict a stark divide between a virtuous, unified populace and a corrupt elite (Montaigne, 2021). Populists maintained that the sovereignty of the people must be expressed through direct democracy, often positioning this as superior to liberal and representative democratic systems. Positing the former as exploitative and oppressive, Within the social sciences, populism is often considered a formation of ideas, defined as an ideology that contrasts the morally good people with the corrupt elite. The definition of the people varies across different populist movements, ranging from class based, ethnic, or national identities. Populists generally portray elites as the bourgeoisie including: political, economic, cultural, and media establishments as a monolithic group that prioritises its own interests, often at the expense of the wider population. Populist

movements are typically led by charismatic figures who present themselves as the true voice of the people (Mudde&Kaltwasser, 2017).

Further, populists not only define who the real people are but also exclude those who do not conform to their narrative, regardless of nationality or citizenship (Mueller, 2019), there are some basic factors associated with populism, distinctive reaction to the social dislocations of colonialism and globalisation, which can be expressed in a variety of ways depending on the local, regional and historical context. In this sense, we see similarities that signifies the dynamic nature of populism between more advanced economies (Albertazzi& McDonnell, 2008) as well as less economically developed parts of the world (Conniff, 1999, Mizuno &Phongpaichit, 2009). These reactions arise as a response to two developments: frustration with the nature of political representation and participation within African political space (Urbinati, 2014), and the emergence of new kinds of social marginalisation, precarious existence (Standing, 2011) and disenchantment with the broken promises of liberal and constitutional democratisation, shown in the multiple separatist agitations on going in Nigeria, Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) and Oduduwa nation, etcetera These broken promises include social mobility and improved material circumstances through the pursuit of education, new skills and sheer hard work.

Populism, as a political approach, is distinct from other political ideologies, as manifest across various populist movements worldwide, within the context of different leadership styles. (Karlson, 2024). Secondly, there is superficial representation of the Society: Populism often presents a simplified expression of society, by categorising it into two opposing groups: the people and the elite. This dichotomy promotes populist rhetoric, such that it portrays the populace as united, while the elites are otherwise, disconnected and corrupt. The simplicity of this division allows populists to appeal to a wider range of disenchanted citizenry, compounding socioeconomic issues between both groups, the divisive line promotes and thrives on opposition to the elites in society.

Following the already established, criticism of the elite as fundamental to a populist discourse, populists accuse elites, whether they are politicians, business leaders, or intellectuals, of being out of touch with ordinary people and serving their interests at the expense of the public, this antagonism helps populists mobilise support against the stigmatised public enemy. Furthermore, populism lays claims to being the custodian to the truth about the will and the emotions of the

People: Populists assert that they have a unique ability to understand and articulate the true will of the people, thus, positioning them as the only genuine representatives of the populace, disregarding opposition as being incapable of representation, in order to legitimise their leadership and policies. Notably populism underscores the centrality of the people in the society: In populist ideology, the people, reflecting the will of the majority, are portrayed as the rightful holders of power and sovereignty, this can lead to tensions within democratic systems, where pluralism and institutionalism, safeguards are valued.

Further, it perceives the people as a homogeneous entity: Populists often view the people as a compact group (monolithic) with shared interests and values, with no regards for internal differences such as class, ethnicity, or ideology, which promotes a strong sense of collective identity among supporters, notwithstanding the disadvantages of marginalisation of minority groups and the suppression of dissent. It usually declares a serious crisis as tool or anchor of its own emergence: Populists, often declares that society is facing an existential crisis, which only populists can resolve. This sense of urgency is used to justify radical measures and to rally support for their cause, by creating a narrative of imminent and existential threat. It deploys anti-establishment rhetoric or discourse to gain sympathy of the people targeted, Populists frequently employ anti-establishment rhetoric, positioning themselves as outsiders and the voice challenging the status quo. This discourse appeals to voters who feel disillusioned with traditional political parties and institutions, and it helps to cultivate an image of authenticity and rebellion against a corrupt system. It is further characterised by anti-intellectualism: anti-intellectualism is another common feature of populism, where populists discountenance expert opinion and complex analysis in favour of simple, emotive appeals. This position reverberates with segments of the population that felt alienated or dismissed by intellectual elites, the South Eastern Nigeria, a section of the agitating group responds to the position of the academicians who are not in consonance with their ideology as ‘‘Otelectuals,’’ (Field work response, 2025) and it reinforces the populist narrative of the elite being out of touch with the realities faced by ordinary people. In all these fundamental features are instrumentalised by appealing to the emotions, fears, and aspirations of the populace.

Ethnicity

The Greek word *ethnos*, which means country, is where the word *ethnic* first appeared (Tandu & Etta, 2018: 115). Although the concept of ethnicity is a buzzword which has equally followed ideological nuances, at times very controversial notwithstanding scholars have offered definitions which are useful and serve as guide to understanding the concept of ethnicity. Similar to other concepts in social science, ethnicity has multiple definitions. It is a strong sense of affinity to ancestral cleavages is evoked by ethnicity, which reflects a complex interplay of emotions and historical links. It includes a passionate declaration of devotion to one's cultural background, placing its ideals and goals above all others (Nnamani, 2020). According to Olaniyan and Omotola (2015), an ethnic group is characterised by its unique communal character that transcends geographic borders and is shared by members who have similar cultural and social qualities. This shared identity promotes a feeling of community and has a big impact on how each person behaves in social and political settings. Language is essential to ethnic identification since it is the main indicator of group cohesiveness and identity (Iwaloye & Ibeanu, 1997), members of an ethnic group through their dialects and language group, encouraging dialogue, and strengthening social ties from birth or by historical bequest.

According to Afkami (2012: 6) "Ethnicity is defined as a collective identity predicated on the idea that a collectivity has its roots in common ancestry, heritage, religion, culture, nationality, language, and a territory". As a homogenous set of people bounded by the same cultural and ancestral links, Nnoli (1978: 5) conceived ethnicity from a sociological perspective, to him ethnicity is a product of "social construct connected to relationships between people from various ethnic backgrounds". Oladiran (2013: 698) asserts that when a group of people are bounded in terms of culture and language, used as a sense of unity and means of communication, they are demonstrating ethnic affinity or disposition. In a similar fashion, Enloe (1978: 33) described ethnicity "an artificial foundation of identification and collective organisation contrived by outsiders searching for an effective weapon of political and economic domination." It is for this reason that ethnicity has been viewed as a tactical tool for preserving its advantages or the one which a marginalised minority uses to demand political redress, it is easy for ethnicity to present itself as a pluralist messiah, a populist champion, it will be pertinent to mention that, respondents from the field research indicated that ethnicity is categorised into: conservatist, liberal, radical and hybrid ethnicity, while those of liberal ethnic concept concerns itself with

recognition without deliberately pushing for group domination, (Taylor, 1992), the conservatists calls for retention and deepening of cultural beliefs, (Geertz, 1963), the radicalists insists on cultural identity and pushes for group domination (Ted Gure, 2000), they are more of populists in action, while the hybrid is a combination of the liberals and conservatists.

The splitting or polarisation of voters intoblocs based on their ethnic identities and regional loyalties and cleavages, ethno - regionalpolitical involvement and mobilisation on both claims to ethnic uniqueness and regional identification. National, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences that influence political allegiances and policies.The mobilisation of ethnic groups for political ends through language, ethno populism, ethno history, religion, traditions, manifesting as ethnic nationalism. On the flip side national identity has the potential to motivate ethnic communities to assert their political rights as nations inside a nation-state by means of the rediscovery of their ethnic past.

Theethnicity has been interrogated using a variety of approaches and methods. Many scholars have used both liberal and Marxist perspectives. Nnoli (1978:12) for example employed a Marxist methodology in his analysis. According to him, ethnicity is a part of the infrastructure, or superstructure, of society. This perspective holds the notion of class awareness in relations to the contending struggle between the social forces in a bid to sustain the capitalist state (Onimode, 1981). This perspective lends credence to the notion that capitalist state is deliberately structured to protect the interest of the capitalist using ethnicity create tension and undermine the unity of the masses. Marxists argue that biological differences alone can adequately explain the historicity of racism and that sociocultural differences are sufficient to explain the longevity of racial allegiance. Ethnicity only benefits those who want to divert attention from examinations of the economic challenges facing the society. This is necessary to prevent the potential revolt that could result from individuals realising their classes, which could topple the social structure and ethno populism is a veritable instrument to achieve such.

Contrary to the Marxist perspective on the definition of ethnicity, the liberal perspective holds that ethnicity implies the conventional idea of a national grouping. An ethnic group (or tribe) is a collection of people who share the same historical experience, culture, language, and future beliefs. Liberal theorists contend that political development or modernisation are the causes of ethnicity, Using colonialism in Africa as an example, Zoberg (1968) believes that the coming

together of numerous ethnic groups led to the struggle for societal values (Ibid 1968). The scholars believe that ethnicity is exclusively an African or third-world phenomenon because they attribute ethnicity to modernity or political development.

Considering the foregoing, ethnicity can be perceived as a concept and social condition within a particular environment. It is for this reason that Osaghae (1995) conceive "ethnicity" as a social construction built on practices that are specific to a culture, together with a unique set of symbols and cosmology. Believing in a common historical trajectory provides a legacy of symbols, heroes, events, beliefs, and hierarchies, validating social identities that distinguish insiders from outsiders. Ethnic culture has a big influence on how people see themselves, yet identity and culture are closely related. Therefore, ethnicity may also be understood as the use of ethnic identity and differences for one's own benefit. Thus, IDEA International, (2000) consider ethnicity as a social construction by political elites to promote their interest. This study aptly points out that ethnicity is dynamic and will not be proper to view it as a single concept but classified into: Liberal, Conservative, Radical and Hybrid ethnicity as adumbrated above, while liberal ethnicity aligns with the principles of liberal and constitutional democracy, the conservatist concerns itself with the culture and the beliefs of the group, for an instance some faction of the Yoruba ethnic group in South Western Nigeria holds fast the principles of "Omoluabi" this implies truth and equality, going further the radical ethnic group believes in the weaponisation of ethnicity for the capture of political power and domination of other ethnic groups, finally the hybrid ethnic group is a combination of the liberal and conservatist ideologies, etcetera.

Ethnic Equity: Ethnic equity within the context of this study is rooted in the African traditional rights or ancestral heritage; a right that equally pervades most cultural societies. It is always not about welfare but the quest to preserve ancient root. This study recognises the significance of ethnic equity as a panacea to ethnic populism, nationalism and conflict. Ethnic equity is different from equality, while equality generalises, equity takes into account various layers of the subject matter, it looks into the historical, institutional, political, economic, and philosophical imbalances faced by various ethnic groups (Fraser, 2000) and takes strategic and technical actions to correct such imbalances. Equality strives to mete out same treatment to all while

equity concerns itself with identifying peculiar needs. Lucia Melcore, the HR Director of World Economic Forum (WEF), Equality and Inclusion Europe and Global E & I Practice at P & G corroborated this position. At the World Economic Forum (WEF), she pointed out that “one size fits it all approach of United Nations (UN) doesn’t work” (Lucia, 2025) in solving ethnic problems.

It is therefore pertinent that with respect to ethnic conflicts, groups, policy makers, institutions and persons that superintend peace initiatives and conflict resolution adhere to the principle of equity, which implies identifying peculiar needs of parties to the conflict. The failure to overtime identify and address the peculiarities of these ethnic communities escalates conflict to its intractable level. This goes to explain that inequities if not properly accounted for, could create gaps for ethnic warriors could instrumentalise or construct it into major conflicts through ethno populism, the imbalances created by the insensitiveness to equity accounts for the on-going conflagration in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine. According to Taylor (1994), ethnic conflict is beyond the struggle for limited resources but also the struggle for recognition. This interestingly represents the connection between political populism, ethnicity and the challenge to nation building. This study thus highlights the significance of equity in handling ethnic cases.

NATION BUILDING

While the nexus of the study centred on political populism the research also examined nation building in Nigeria and Ghana. The research focused on the challenges faced by these two countries in their attempt to achieve nationhood despite abundance of human and natural resources, but remained significantly poor and underdeveloped (Aluko, 2009) however the study observed that ethnic sentiments, poor leadership or governance, religious bigotry and political instability occasioned by political populism are accountable for the intractable challenge to building a viable united nation Ikayase&Okeke (2017) argued that upon African independence in the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists agreed to the need for a deliberate attempt to Nation-Building in societies with multiple ethnic, religious and racial diversities like Nigeria and Ghana,

(Binder, 1964; Coleman & Rosberg, 1966; Zolberg, 1967). Which its significance cannot be overemphasised.

To close the lacuna for the historical empires and kingdoms obtainable precolonialism, however to attempt a conceptualisation, it will be important to in the instance to explain what is a nation, Iyase&Okeke pointed out that ‘‘Nation generally connotes a stable, horizontally developed community of people with a territory under a single government with distinct culture and language’’ (Iyase&Okeke, 2019)

Elaigwu, averse to the postulation of Iyase&okeke, to link nation building rather to state building: which refers to the acceptance by members of the polity or a legitimacy of a central government, with the central government as a symbol, (Elaigwu, 2011) or the involvement and the acceptance of other members of the civic body as equal fellow members of a corporate nation, a recognition of the rights of other members to a share of common history, resources, values, and other aspects of the state, (Walker, 2011), it’s a process of integrating and consolidation various facets of the society that led up to the establishment of the modern nation-state as distinct from precolonial form of traditional states, such as kingdoms and dynasties, empires, emirates, Iyase&Okeke aptly put it as an ‘‘architectural metaphor’’ (Iyase&Okeke, 2019), talking of various societal agents to structure a conscious group called nation, from Smiths concept it is the conscious deployment of the people’s collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of developing the psychic and physical space that we identify as ours. It involves the development of behaviours, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate our history and culture, concretise and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of the nation, (Smith (2012), it is constructing the identity of a nation, This process aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation-building can involve the use of strategies or major infrastructural development to foster social harmony and economic growth. (Iyase&Okeke, 2019), this entails enhancing justice, trust, sustainable peace, equitable distribution of resources and political power

Comparative Table of Political Populist Events in Ghana and Nigeria

Period/Year	Ghana – Event & Leader/Movement	Nigeria – Event & Leader/Movement	Concise Annotation
1950s–1960s	Kwame Nkrumah & CPP “Self-Government Now,” Pan-African populism	Azikiwe, Awolowo, Bello – nationalist populism	Both countries mobilized mass support against colonialism. Ghana’s populism stressed <i>Pan-African socialism</i> (Nkrumah, 1961), while Nigeria’s was fragmented along ethnic/region lines (Sklar, 1963).
1979	Rawlings’ AFRC coup – anti-corruption populism	Shagari’s NPN – populist electoral promises	Ghana saw <i>revolutionary populism</i> targeting elites (Shillington, 1992), while Nigeria’s Second Republic used populist rhetoric around housing/jobs (Joseph, 1991).
1981–1992	Rawlings’ PNDC – “People’s Revolution,” grassroots committees	Buhari’s Military Regime (1983–85) – <i>War Against Indiscipline</i>	Both used populist appeals to justify authoritarian control: Rawlings through “people’s committees,” Buhari via <i>moral populism</i> (Mustapha, 2007).
1992–2000	Rawlings’ NDC “man of the people” in democratic transition	Abiola’s SDP (1993) <i>Hope 93</i> campaign annulled	Ghana institutionalized populism via democratic transition (Gyimah-Boadi, 1999). Nigeria’s annulment of Abiola’s populist victory sparked mass resistance (Diamond, 1995).
1995	<i>KumePreko</i> protest against VAT (Rawlings era)	Populist dissent under Abacha regime suppressed	Ghana experienced one of its largest civic populist protests (Boafo-Arthur, 1999). Nigeria’s military authoritarianism stifled populist civic space (Ihonvbere, 1996).
1999–2007	Post-Rawlings populist rhetoric in elections	Obasanjo’s PDP – anti-corruption, unity populism	Ghana’s populism shifted to multiparty competition. Nigeria’s populism linked to “rebirth” narratives and resistance to subsidy removal (Suberu, 2007).
2012–2016	AkufoAddo’s NPP – Free SHS populist policy	Jonathan’s “I had no shoes” campaign;	Ghana used <i>policy populism</i> (education access) (Whitfield,

Period/Year	Ghana – Event & Leader/Movement	Nigeria – Event & Leader/Movement	Concise Annotation
		Occupy Nigeria (2012)	2009). Nigeria witnessed <i>personal populism</i> and mass protest populism (Ibrahim, 2013).
2015	<i>DumsorMustStop</i> protests against power outages	Buhari’s APC – “Change” populist campaign	Ghana’s populism was civic/youth-based. Nigeria’s populism was electoral, centered on Buhari’s anti-corruption image (Omotola, 2015).
2020–2021	<i>FixtheCountry</i> youth populist movement	<i>EndSARS</i> nationwide youth uprising	Both illustrate social-media-driven populism, transcending ethnic divides; highlight generational frustration with governance (Gyampo, 2021; Adebisi, 2021).
2023	Upcoming Ghana 2024 elections – populist expectations	Peter Obi & Labour Party Obidient Movement	Nigeria saw grassroots youth populism challenging political elites (Obi-Ani et al., 2023). Ghana expected similar pressures in 2024 elections.

POLITICAL POPULISM A CHALLENGE TO NATION BUILDING

- ❖ Takes advantage of ethnic social divisions: the populists in advocating for the perceived marginalised, can also exploit and deepen existing ethnic, class, and regional cracks through divisive rhetoric and appeals to specific identities.
- ❖ Tactically weakens existing institutions and bypass established governance structures, ultimately hindering nation building and development: Populist simplistic solutions and quick fixes to complex socio-economic issues could be a sort of Greek gifts as it could lead to neglecting the long-term development strategies required for sustainable nation-building, anti-elite rhetoric: The constant presentation of a corrupt elite can explored to alienate and dismantle established social and political groups, which can be necessary for a broad-based national consensus.

- ❖ Degrading democratic institutions: African Populism targets institutions: The absence of well-institutionalised political parties, internal democracy and the prevalence of strong personalistic political actors create a fertile ground for populist strategies that emphasises direct connections between leaders and voters.
- ❖ Economic dis-equilibrium: Economic inequality and widespread dissatisfaction with existing political structures triggered by inflation, unemployment, trade deficits, could lead to populist movements and ethnic conflicts in Africa.
- ❖ Post-Colonial Legacies: The challenges of governance, socio-economic disparities, and the complex legacy of colonialism create a challenging political landscape where populism can flourish.
- ❖ Ultra ethnic nationalism: Nationalist rhetoric, emphasizing ethnic pride and sovereignty, is a common tool used by populist leaders to gain support by appealing to patriotism.

However, while populism can offer a voice to the marginalised and increase electoral participation according Nugent, its tendency to undermine institutional frameworks and exploit divisions ultimately presents a significant challenge to the long-term goals of nation-building in Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Political populism or members of the peoples party is an attempt on democratic reformation, an effort to expand the peoples political participation, social justice and an equitable distribution of resources and political power, it implies the right of the citizens to vote and place demands on the political system for good governance and social empowerment, so it will be right to say that populism is an attempt to deepen democracy

However as the society develops they begin to redefine the society along morale lines, the pure and honest versus the corrupt. The political elites tactically develop extreme views, the populist ideology to an controversial version with emphasis on direct representation and morale opposition between the people and the mighty,

Furthermore, in the twentieth century the ideology became highly dynamic, the populist political actors deployed leftist rhetoric to build mass support creating a mixture of democracy with

519 personalistic leadership, going forward populism globally began to take leftist (pro people) and
520 rightist anti elite disposition,

521 In Africa, political actors moved to construct neopopulist ethnic variants as an instrument to
522 mobilise supporters, capture and retain power as a response to the debilitating violent
523 political conflict ravaging Africa, pointedly Nigeria and Ghana. these conditions evolve from
524 ethnic conflicts and high intensity isolationist and vulgar campaigns example “Nigeria must go”
525 deployed by the APC within the Northern part of Ghana and “it is our own” in Nigeria
526 deployed by PDP, LP parties especially within the Eastern flank of Nigeria, leaving the
527 continent on a precarious pedestal because of the attendant effect on the attempt to weave
528 together into one unified nation within the multicultural and multi ethnic countries, especially
529 Nigeria and Ghana,

530 This study is a robust contribution in addressing the menace of ethnic populism. And in doing
531 this, the study identified and drew attention to ethnic equity as a solution to the protracted
532 challenge ethnic populism presents, from its ravaging effects on societies, especially the
533 African political crisis which formed the focal point of the study. The study conceptualised
534 ethnic equity from the perspective of ethnic recognition. This presupposes paying adequate
535 attention to the grievances of the ethnic composition of states or countries, as contrasted to
536 equality (Ifeanacho and Kike, 2023). A deliberate balancing borne out of deliberately taking into
537 cognisance the needs and cultural peculiarities of African countries pointedly, created by
538 colonialism, the study pointed out that ethnic equity possibly would have forestalled the crisis in
539 the continent, the region. And the same can be said of other countries experiencing similar
540 ethnic political conflicts occasioned by political populism around the world

541 Conclusively, with respect to the questions earlier posed in the study, the study argues that ethnic
542 conflict driven by populism, goes beyond ensuring that everyone regardless of their ethnicity
543 has equal access and opportunities and resources, but rather, recognising the peculiar needs and
544 requests of host communities or nations. This is because the dynamic circumstances in conflict
545 societies effectively render one size fit all approach impotent. More so when you consider the
546 fact that ethnic conflicts are not always about the struggle for limited resources but also the
547 struggle for recognition.

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