

 <p>ISSN (O): 2320-5407 ISSN (P): 3107-4928</p>	<p>Journal Homepage: www.journalijar.com</p> <h2>INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)</h2> <p>Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/22249 DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/22249</p>	
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 14 September 2025

Final Accepted: 16 October 2025

Published: November 2025

Key words:-

political populism, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethnicity, Ethnic equity and nation-building.

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 a 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, demonstrated how ethnic nationalism and 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, social cohesion and concluded 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.

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Introduction:-

Political populism remains a topical global political discourse, a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of scholars across academic spheres and ideological persuasions, notably scholars of populist orientation bear 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 Nugent posits that populism is not only positive but represents the attempt to defend the interests of the less privileged within the democratic community, (Nugent, 2019). However, 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 immigration debate pervades with highly xenophobic views and has become socially acceptable, especially as they pertain to people of colour (Mudde, 2019, Poynting, & Briskman 2018).

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 advent of colonialism, which 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 to meet public, social demands, through rising unemployment and income insecurity, declining trust in the public institutions this lead to distress, political polarisation and populism (World Bank, 2011)

Furthermore, Populist tools may be dynamically effective when premised on nationalist sentiment, ethnic solidarity or religious identity, or combinations of all, as is the case in Africa: Nigeria and Ghana to be precise. Fundamentally, the present day resurgence of populist politics in Africa can be seen as a product of wide-ranging and deep-seated social distress across the states of Africa, occasioned 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 crisis 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, loss of household savings, (Algan, Y, Guriev, Papaloannou, E, & Passari, 2017) global financial crises, poor governance and complaints of ethnic marginalisation especially in Nigeria, where traditionally dominant political parties have been challenged 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.

Additionally, 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 instance, the Igbophobia was expressed in Lagos during and after the 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).

In the foregoing, 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. Consequently signs of distress amplified in the aftermath of the most recent global financial crisis, as mentioned above, and this sustains populist manifestations.

More so, 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 a challenging case for a precise interrogation of populism due to the prevalence of strongman political actors and the lack of ideology fundamental to many political parties, the longstanding absence of institutionalised political parties dominant in the continent, and lack of internal democracy, absence of rule of law, the leading of presidential systems with strong executive powers gives credence to populist tendencies (Cheibub, 2007, Cheibub&Limongi, 2002, Van de Walle, 2003)Notably, populism is present only when it manifests as a political strategy, supported by a certain ideological mantra and sociocultural manifestations. Many distinct African politicians, both democratic, authoritarian and military regimes, covering both incumbent and opposition leaders, and referring to varying electoral activities such as Pre-electoral hand outs, campaign actions or mantras in Nigeria and as well as in Ghana, xenophobic discourse, ethnophobic 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 the conduct of political actors building popular vote, amongsdiverse and not organised constituency for Political mobilisation, a strategy that relies on individual politicians who seek to augment their power and control, and 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, additionally, 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 relied on the use of popular, coarse, and sometimes vulgar language, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Donald Trump (they will eat your pets, they will kill your cats) Juan Peron, the Monkeys as banded around Nigeria by a government official and dramatic colourful, and even politically incorrect acts that grab the public's attention, "this is our turn" mantra during 2023 presidential election in Nigeria (Mudde, 2004) and suggests an ideological approach in which populism revolves, 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 its linkages to the down pressed of the society, that are perceived to be politically and economically marginalised, driven 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, Nugent, 2004). In 1981, GhananianFlight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings ousted the civilian government of HillaLimann 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). Again in 31st December 1983 the democratic government lead by president,ShehuShagari was out-sted by a military coup by Major General MuhammaduBuhari, (Daily Times, 1984).

However, 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 are 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 influence 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 in-depth interviews. And to theoretically locate political populism, the study used the social constructivists and the instrumentalists' theories. The introduction of the second theory became prominent due to the need to fill in the gap identified in the first theory by explaining the weaponisation of populism within the African political system. The study is a robust contribution to the existing body of knowledge, especially with regard 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 an effective united nation. Given the consequences associated with ethnic conflict, such as human rights violations, genocide, and others, these 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 the 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 adopt 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 the social constructivist theory and instrumentalist 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 a 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 is a dynamic and complex phenomenon, constructed and expressed. With this method, the emphasis moved from characterising ethnic drive to creating it by deploying populist materials. The constructivist 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 the 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 and manipulated narratives in order to expand their power base (Brass, 1991).

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 and creation of political capital 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 countries (field work response, 2025).

Instrumentalist Theory:-

The proponents of the instrumentalist approach, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, infer that elites create ethnic tensions and in some cases, inadvertently provoke them in a manner that could incite violence as a strategy to seize 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 and underrates emotional responses to events, 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 a 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 waded 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 how the re-surfing phenomenon of populism, driven by ethnicity, is 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-surfing in a dimension that has consequences for the country's 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, Katz & Larzarsfield in their two-step flow of communication of populism frequently manifests as movements or leaders (Katz & Larzarsfield 1955) 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. Notably, 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).

Furthermore, 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 signify the dynamic nature of populism between more advanced economies, 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 Agitators, 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 a superficial representation of Society: Populism often presents a simplified account 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, are also monolithic in corruption and exploitation. 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 advance the argument that they have a special 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 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 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 regard for internal differences such as class, 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 a tool or anchor of its own emergence: Populists often declare that society is facing an existential threat which only populists can resolve. This sense of urgency is used to justify radical measures and to rally support for their course, by creating a narrative of imminent and existential danger. It deploys anti-establishment rhetoric or discourse to gain the 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 feature of populism, where populists discountenance expert opinion and complex analysis in favour of simple, emotive appeals. This position echoes 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 do not align with their approach to the agitation as “Intellectuals,” (Field work response, 2025) and it reinforces the populist narrative of the elite being out of touch with the realities faced by ordinary people. All these fundamental features are instrumentalised by appealing to the emotions, fears, and aspirations of the populace.

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 advent of colonialism, which led to a type of economic, political, and cultural modernisation. Interestingly, however populism has demonstrated greatly that those occupying different social class positions could be unified by common discomfort of social processes that have kept them at bay 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 is the case in Africa: Nigeria and Ghana to be precise.

Fundamentally, the present day 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 or recurring 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, that led to social distress as accounted in the introduction, (Alganetal, 2017 & Sulker and Basu, 2013) the impact manifests in global financial crises, poor governance and complaints of ethnic marginalisation especially in Nigeria, triggered populists activities within traditionally dominant political parties, emanating both externally or internally (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), thereby

deepening the academic and the national political discourse influenced by 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 engrained 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 instance, the Igbophobia was expressed in Lagos State Nigeria during and after the 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 ideologically based on nationalist bias or sentiments, ethnic solidarity or religious identity, or different combinations of these. Against such a backdrop, 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 in the political system and 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).

For the purpose of emphasises, African populism emerged as a consequence of coups in the 1980s that were justified by military leaders as the only veritable strategy to ousting corrupt incumbents who had mismanaged and exploited citizens (Chazanetal. 1999, Nugent, 2004) from Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings of Ghana to General Buhari of Nigeria, Ideologically, called the need for a social revolution persuading their citizens to rise against the pettiness of corruptionandexploitation, hinging on providing a space for the peoples participation in governance, (Rothchild&Boadi, 1989). Where they accused politicians of state plunder and call for moral cleansing and direct participation of ordinary people, absolutely Rawlings and Buharienvoked populists anti corruption narratives.

Ethnicity:-

The Greek word *ethnos*, which means country, is where the word *ethnic* first appeared. Although the concept of ethnicity is a buzzword which has equally followed ideological nuances, at times very controversial, scholars have offered definitions which are useful and serve as a 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 that is evoked by the group, 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, (Ifeanacho& kike 2025). This common 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, encourage dialogue and strengthen social ties from birth or by historical bequest, to them it is 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 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 bound 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, minorities uses it 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 (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 into blocs based on their ethnic identities and regional loyalties and cleavages, ethno-regional political involvement and mobilisation, both claims to ethnic uniqueness and regional identification, 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, and traditions, manifesting as ethnic nationalism.

In the foregoing ethnicity 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 relation 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 the capitalist state is deliberately structured to protect the interests of the capitalists by using ethnicity to 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 the economic challenges facing society. This is necessary to prevent the potential revolt that could occur from individuals realising their classes, which could overthrow 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 is the cause 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 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 mentioned 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 equity, 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, Ethnic equity: implies an objective and unbiased attention given to an ethnic group in order to

deliberately preserve her access to political power, opportunity, resource allocation, social inclusion, etcetera, it is a deliberate attempt to mitigate structural, psychological, philosophical disadvantage suffered by an ethnic group, it looks into the historical, institutional, political and economic imbalances faced by various ethnic groups (Fraser, 2000) and takes strategic and technical actions to correct such imbalances. Equality strives to mete out generalised treatment to all, while equity concerns itself with identifying peculiar needs.

In addition a two-state solution, between Israeli and Palestine conflict with clearly delineated boundaries seems to be the solution. But since 1990, these two warring ethnicities failed to negotiate a two state solution which could have represented the principle of equity. (Ifeanacho, C. M. & Kike, C. K., 2025). 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 overtime to 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 and they could instrumentalise or construct it into major conflicts through ethno populism, Igbophobia is a populist tool that resurged in Lagos state Nigeria after a presidential candidate whose ethnic stronghold is Lagos State but lost in the presidential election to a non indigen, that triggered ethnic friction threatening the state till this day, 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 study centred on political populism, it 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 the abundance of human and natural resources. Still, it 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 significance cannot be over emphasised.

To close the lacuna for the historical empires and kingdoms obtainable pre colonialism, 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 pre-colonial 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 Pan-African socialism (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 revolutionary populism 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) – War Against Indiscipline	Both used populist appeals to justify authoritarian control: Rawlings through “people’s committees,” Buhari via moral populism (Mustapha, 2007).
1992–2000	Rawlings’ NDC “man of the people” in democratic transition	Abiola’s SDP (1993) Hope 93 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	KumePreko 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; Occupy Nigeria (2012)	Ghana used policy populism (education access) (Whitfield, 2009). Nigeria witnessed personal populism and mass protest populism (Ibrahim, 2013).
2015	DumsorMustStop 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	FixtheCountry youth populist movement	EndSARS 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 emphasise direct connections between leaders and voters.
- Economic disequilibrium: Economic inequality and widespread dissatisfaction with existing political structures triggered by inflation, unemployment, and 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, emphasising ethnic pride and sovereignty, is a common tool used by populist leaders to gain support by appealing to patriotism.

However, while it is arguably said that populism can offer a voice to the marginalised and increase electoral participation according to 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, however, as society develops, it begins to redefine itself along moral lines, the pure and honest versus the corrupt. The political elites tactically develop extreme views, the populist ideology to a controversial version with emphasis on direct representation and moral opposition between the people and the mighty, Furthermore, in the twentieth century, the ideology became highly dynamic, and the populist political actors deployed leftist rhetoric to build mass support, creating a mixture of democracy with personalistic leadership. Going forward, populism globally began to take leftist (pro-people) and rightist anti-elite dispositions,

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

This study is a robust contribution to addressing the menace of ethnic populism. And in doing this, the study identified and drew attention to ethnic equity as a solution to the protracted challenge ethnic populism presents, from its ravaging effects on societies, especially the African political crisis which formed the focal point of the study. The study conceptualised ethnic equity from the perspective of ethnic recognition. This presupposes paying adequate attention to the grievances of the ethnic composition of states or countries, as contrasted to equality (Ifeanacho and kike, 2025). A deliberate balancing borne out of conscious taking into cognisance the needs and cultural peculiarities of African countries created by colonialism, the study pointed out that ethnic equity possibly would have forestalled the crisis in the continent: Ethiopia and Tigray, the region, And the dominant presence of Nigerians in Ghana without any deliberate action to ameliorate the fears of Ghananians triggered social friction, the winner takes it all syndrome prevalent in electoral system in Africa, triggers populist actions, especially when the bulk of the looser or opposition is of a particular ethnic stock, same can be said of other countries experiencing similar ethnic political conflicts occasioned by political populism around the world, for an instance the gennocidal threats globally

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

Glosary:-

Otelectuals - A colloquial, anti- intellectual word used to describe intellectuals by an agitating group in the South Eastern Nigeria.

Omoluabi – This represents the principle of equity and fairness in accordance with the Oduduwa culture of the Yorubas in the South Western Nigeria.

Ethnophobia – An ethnic version of the xenophobia, meaning the fear of other or a particular ethnic group.

This is our turn – A campaign mantra deployed by a presidential candidate in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.

Igbophobia– The fear of the Igbo ethnic group in the South Eastern Nigeria

Emilokon– A political campaign slogan ethnically invented by a presidential candidate of a political party with a strong base in the South Western Nigeria, meaning “it is our turn”

Oluomo – A non-state actor and a unionist and a strong supporter of a political party based in Lagos State, South Western Nigeria.

IPOB – Indigenous People of Biafra and Oduduwa Nation are all separatists groups agitating for a separate nation away from Nigeria.

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