

# Recalibration or Power Consolidation of African Ruling Parties?

Nicodemus Minde explores the recent political changes in African ruling parties. Are they recalibrating or consolidating power?

There is an interesting wave of political change that has been happening in African ruling political parties. The [resignation](#) of Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn came a week after that of South African embattled President Jacob Zuma. While the nine lives of Jacob Zuma romantically came to an end on Valentine's Day, Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation was quite unexpected. However, there were similar discontents and rumblings within the ruling parties in both South Africa and Ethiopia. In December, 2017, South Africa's ruling party the African National Congress (ANC) in its 54<sup>th</sup> National Conference in Gauteng elected Cyril Ramaphosa as its new President. The election of Ramaphosa was seen as an attempt by the ANC to [renew its image](#) after a decade-long series of corruption cases embedded in what has come to be termed as 'state capture' by the Zuma-Gupta brothers clique. In Ethiopia, the ruling multi-ethnic coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has been accused of side-lining the Oromos, the largest ethnic community who occupy the Oromia region. The Trigrayan dominance within the ERDF has come under close scrutiny and the resignation of Desalegn was part of the [political shakeup](#) within the ruling coalition.

In November 2017, the wave of change swept Zimbabwe's ruling party ZANU-PF. The '[November soft coup](#)' as it has come to be known, witnessed the transition from the octogenarian long-time leader Robert Mugabe to Emmerson Mnangagwa, his one-time Vice President. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, 2018, Mnangagwa pledged [Zimbabwe's reengagement](#) with the international community after decades of Western isolation under Mugabe. He also spoke on domestic reforms which included a pledge of delivering a democratic election in 2018. With the death of long-time opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai – coincidentally coming on the day Zuma announced his resignation, ZANU-PF's renewal and possible consolidation couldn't be more ominous. Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has been facing internal schisms and leadership struggles and the death of its leader could further split the party.

## Recalibration of ruling parties in Africa

The wave of political change in African ruling political parties has also been felt in Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania. The new Angolan President Joao Lourenco has also been transforming the ruling party the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) after his election in August, 2017. Despite being handpicked and anointed successor by former President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, Lourenço has been a man of his own. He has made radical changes in many sectors of the country including the [firing](#) of the former first daughter, Isabel dos Santos from the state oil company Sonangol. Similar changes have been taking place in Mozambique. President Felipe Nyusi, through a careful political balance, has been changing the phase of the country's economic management. Nyusi has also taken up the fight against corruption in government and his party FRELIMO. In neighbouring Tanzania, the ruling party Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) has been recalibrating and restructuring. In the period after the election of firebrand President John Magufuli in October, 2015, CCM has embarked on a cleansing mission after its henchmen were previously involved in grand corruption. President Magufuli has openly spoken about the elite corruption within the party and its networks. CCM's one-party dominance was shaken up in the 2015 elections and President Magufuli through an internal party renewal strategy has begun a [recalibration of the party](#) dubbed as 'CCM Mpya' – New CCM. The party's recalibration strategy has included among other things, such as party financing restructuring. CCM has also, weakened the opposition through clandestine co-opting of the opposition leaders and curtailing political freedoms through President Magufuli's demagogic [populist rhetoric](#).



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### **Incumbent Parties' Apprehensions**

Faced with the fear of losing power, African ruling parties have found new ways of sustaining their hold on to power. Rachel Beatty Riedl in her [book](#) *Authoritarian Origins of Democratic Party Systems in Africa* observes that African “[...] incumbent parties continue to seek a central role in transition processes alongside other political parties. As such, faced with the reality losing power, many incumbent and especially independence parties grapple with that anxiety and apprehension” p.12. Riedl, argues that if “[...] incumbent parties are strong, they tightly control the democratic transition process. And where incumbent parties are weak, other players force their reforms and restructuring” p.12. This means, strong incumbent parties such as ANC, ZANU-PF, MPLA and CCM begin to reimage and restructure themselves either before or after competitive and defining elections.

### **Recalibration or Consolidation?**

Many a times, African incumbent independence parties face the challenge of living in past liberation legacies and glories. Their transformation to modern political outfits has often times been difficult. Maintaining the liberation legacies has been a source of their political survival especially from the rural uneducated voters.

Historically, African political systems have been shaped by neo-patrimonialism and clientelism within ruling parties and ruling elites. But with the wave of democratization and opposition pushback, ruling parties are finding new ways of consolidating power. Faced with a contending opposition in the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the newly formed radical socialist party the Economic Freedom Fighter (EFF), ANC has seen its vote share in the municipal elections [fall](#) from 66.3% in 2006 to 55.7% in 2011. In Tanzania, a consolidated opposition saw CCM lose drop its winning ratio of 62.8% in the presidential elections in 2010 to 58% in the 2015 elections. In 2008, the opposition MDC in Zimbabwe managed to get into a coalition government with ZANU-PF, in an election that marred with controversies. It is evident that ruling parties are grappling with emergent strong oppositions and changing political climates within the parties, resulting to their recalibration in order to consolidate power.

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