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# HUSTLER POPULISM, ANTI-JUBILEE BACKLASH AND ECONOMIC INJUSTICE IN KENYA'S 2022 ELECTIONS

PETER LOCKWOOD \*

## Abstract

Deputy President William Ruto's victorious presidential campaign in Kenya's 2022 elections saw him champion the plight of the 'hustlers', young informal economy workers on low, piecemeal incomes. Reconfiguring political identities around notions of economic hardship and struggle, Ruto's campaign appeared emblematic of what scholars have recently identified as a turn towards 'populism' in Africa, transmuting ethno-nationalist identities into class-based ones. However, whilst Ruto's campaign capitalized on rising prices to devastating political effect, he also channelled discontent with the Jubilee government and its unmet promises of shared prosperity. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in central Kenya's Kiambu region since 2017, this article understands Ruto's victory not through the lens of 'hustler populism' but rather as an anti-Jubilee 'backlash'. Ruto's campaign took advantage of Uhuru Kenyatta's personal unpopularity as voters increasingly questioned the nature of 'dynastic' authority and 'state capture', seeking to punish Uhuru personally for his failures to create prosperity in the region whilst enriching himself at their expense. Elaborating on these tensions, the article points

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towards broken ‘moral economies’ between voters and politicians as a vital field of research.

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‘WE ARE GOING TO CHANGE THIS CONVERSATION’, William Ruto tells a crowd in Nairobi’s Dagoretti suburb in January 2021. ‘It is not going to be about “tribes”. It is not going to be about leaders. It’s not going to be about power. It’s not going to be about positions’. He pauses. ‘It is going to be about the hustlers – the ordinary people! It is going to be about enterprise – the wheelbarrow conversation. It is going to be about jobs, for ordinary people! We want a united, inclusive society where even the ordinary, even the wheelbarrow guy is part of the conversation in Kenya!’ The crowd erupts in jubilation.<sup>1</sup>

The words of William Ruto on the campaign trail in 2021 captured the stakes of the 2022 election as he made his appeal to ‘the hustlers’, a prominent social and political identity that many Kenyans have come to claim. Ruto’s words addressed a broad spectrum of young Kenyans who have found their pathways towards adulthood, independence and self-accomplishment obstructed by a lack of economic opportunity—what anthropologists have described as a situation of prolonged ‘waithood’, a transition to adult independence blocked by limited means.<sup>2</sup> With formal jobs difficult to come by, young Kenyans are forced towards the informal economy, gleaning a living by working in occupations as varied as construction workers, minivan drivers, tea pickers and barbers.<sup>3</sup> Incomes from such lines of work are notoriously variable and uncertain, and experiences of struggle and hardship are common.<sup>4</sup> This is a country where more than 80 percent of people work in the informal economy<sup>5</sup> and where incomes are primed for disturbance by global economic shocks such as those experienced in 2021 and 2022 when rising food prices added further urgency to Ruto’s campaign.

1. *Daily Nation*, ‘We will change the conversations, DP Ruto tells ‘Dynasties’’, *YouTube*, 25 January 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQ6dut6iofc>> (12 November 2021).

2. See, e.g. Alcinda Honwana, *The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa* (Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2012); Daniel Mains, *Hope is cut: Youth, unemployment, and the future in urban Ethiopia* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2012); Adeline Masquelier, ‘Teatime: Boredom and the temporalities of young men in Niger’, *Africa* 83, 3 (2013), pp. 470–491; Yonatan N. Gez and Yvan Droz, ‘Breakthroughs, blockages, and the path to self-accomplishment: The case of Pentecostal church founders in Kenya’, *Africa Today* 67, 2 (2020), pp. 151–173.

3. This is hardly a new predicament. See John Iliffe, *The African poor* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987), pp. 148–149.

4. Tatiana Thieme, Meghan E. Ference and Naomi van Stapele, ‘Harnessing the “hustle”: Struggle, solidarities and narratives of work in Nairobi and beyond’, *Africa* 91, 1 (2021), pp. 1–15.

5. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, ‘National economic survey’, 2022, <<https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-Economic-Survey1.pdf>> (12 April 2023).

Whilst Ruto's message spoke directly to voters' household budgets, under pressure as they undoubtedly were in the build-up to the election, this article argues that his campaign drew a large part of its momentum from a deep disenchantment with the Jubilee government. President Uhuru Kenyatta's Jubilee had won successive elections in 2013 and 2017 on the back of promises to extend prosperity to all and to create a middle-income Kenya with universal health care, affordable housing and low levels of joblessness.<sup>6</sup> For many, these promises never materialized. Meanwhile, Kenyatta continued to expand his personal and family business interests. It was against this backdrop that Ruto shaped a narrative of resistance against a failed and wantonly greedy political establishment. His campaign attacked the entrenched wealth of President Uhuru Kenyatta (hereinafter referred as Uhuru), labelling his family as one of Kenya's established 'dynasties', and what he cast as their continued desire to cling to political power and economic entitlement at the expense of ordinary citizens and their eroding living standards.

Much has already been written about the success of Ruto's populist 'hustler vs dynasties' message,<sup>7</sup> but less about discontent with Jubilee and Kenyatta himself. In this article, I explore the politics of William Ruto's victory in the 2022 polls through the prism of Jubilee's declining support. Nowhere was this more palpable than in central Kenya, where Ruto won by a landslide. Newspapers evoked images of a 'yellow wave', the colour of his Kenya Kwanza alliance replacing the red of Jubilee, a 'colour revolution'.<sup>8</sup> A critical aspect of William Ruto's success in Kenya's 2022 elections was taking the lion's share of votes from the Mount Kenya region.<sup>9</sup> I show that it was not simply Ruto's 'hustler' narrative that drew voters from the region to his cause but a powerful and palpable set of political affects—disappointment with Jubilee and its unmet promises of creating economic prosperity. As households sank into debt and destitution, Ruto's campaign harnessed their disaffection, turning fire on Uhuru from within the same Kikuyu ethnic community that had overwhelmingly voted for him in 2013 and 2017. As Ruto's campaign went on, issues of economic justice

6. *Daily Nation*, 'Uhuru Kenyatta's inauguration speech in full', 28 November 2017, <<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/uhuru-kenyatta-s-inauguration-speech-in-full-481780>> (4 November 2022).

7. Justin Willis, Ngala Chome, Nic Cheeseman and Gabrielle Lynch, 'Is change really coming to Kenya?', *The Continent*, 6 August 2022, <<https://mg.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/dd8debd7-thecontinentissue94.pdf>> (3 November 2022); Isabel Pike, "'Hustlers versus dynasty": Kenya's new class politics', March 2021, <<https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/9/hustlers-versus-dynasty-kenyas-new-class-politics/>> (3 November 2022).

8. Peter Kagwanja, 'Whither goest thou, Mt Kenya, in thy shiny yellow regalia?', *Daily Nation*, 14 August 2022, <<https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/whither-goest-thou-mt-kenya-in-thy-shiny-yellow-regalia-3913792>> (22 March 2023).

9. Dauti Kahura, 'Injected with "Yellow Fever" jab, GEMA roots for Ruto in the elections', *This Is Africa*, 15 August 2022, <<https://thisisafrika.me/politics-and-society/injected-with-yellow-fever-jab-gema-roots-for-ruto-in-the-elections/>> (3 November 2022).

rose to the fore. Not only did voters feel that Uhuru had ‘done nothing’ and that he had ‘used’ them to accede to power but also did they feel that he had taken advantage of access to the state to accumulate private wealth in the process. Votes for Ruto were votes ‘against’ Uhuru animated by a desire to punish him and rein in his family’s dominance on the country’s political and economic landscape.

Rather than analysing Ruto’s victory through the lens of his own rhetoric, the article shifts the focus towards discontented former Jubilee voters who were ready to switch their electoral allegiances. To conceptualize their political motivations, the article adopts the concept of ‘backlash’ to characterize their desire to punish Uhuru for his brazen attempts to court votes in the region, against the backdrop of economic malaise. A focus on such an anti-elite ‘backlash’ articulates the tacit social contract Kenyatta brokered with his core voters—that he would create economic prosperity. Failing to do so whilst pursuing his personal enrichment encouraged a desire to remove him from power by his former supporters. Behind Ruto’s campaign was a rejection of established elites rather than concerted support ‘for’ Ruto. Within this context, voting for the ‘Hustler-In-Chief’ represented a jump into the unknown: rather than any concrete expectation, it was founded only on a vague hope that he would improve upon Uhuru’s Jubilee.

In developing these arguments, this article contributes to discussions about populism in African politics. Populism has generally been conceptualized narrowly as a conscious strategy utilized by political leaders in the construction of new and unconventional trans-ethnic alliances.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, this account represents an attempt to view populism from ‘the bottom up’, through the prism of the voices of those participating in the historical events described. It emphasizes that populism operates primarily as what Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser describe as a ‘moral’-political force, one that is experienced internally as downtrodden ‘people’ revolting against a corrupt ‘elite’.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, this article shows that populism’s political force is derived from feelings of discontent towards failed and neglectful elites who renege on their promises. In this regard, it suggests that the study of African politics must go further than embracing the concept of populism alone and continue to study the making of tacit ‘moral economies’—the

10. Nic Cheeseman, ‘Populism in Africa and the potential for an “ethnically blind” politics’, in Carlos de la Torre (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2019), pp. 357–369, p. 358.

11. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism and (liberal) democracy: A framework for analysis’, in Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012), pp. 1–26, pp. 8–10.

moral principles of fairness, justice and equitability—upon which relationships between voters and politicians are made at the ballot box and their breaking during incumbency.<sup>12</sup>

My analysis is based on the ethnographic research I have been carrying out in central Kenya over the last 5 years. Between January 2017 and July 2018, I lived amongst smallholder families in a peri-urban region of Kiambu County whilst conducting doctoral fieldwork, returning again in August 2019. This was a period of immersion in everyday life, and I lived with a host family throughout, speaking Kiswahili and Gĩkũyũ, which I continued to learn throughout my fieldwork.<sup>13</sup> I built a wide network of interlocutors across several demographics, but especially amongst young men from the neighbourhood I lived in, anonymized here as Ituura on the outskirts of a town I call 'Chungwa' in southern Kiambu. These were ethnic Kikuyu territories on the outskirts of Nairobi, home to poor Kikuyu working for low and piecemeal incomes in the peri-urban informal economy, precisely those to whom Ruto pitched his 'hustler vs dynasties' message.<sup>14</sup>

What began as research relationships have, over the years, become long-standing friendships, and I made subsequent trips to Ituura in February and March and in July and August of 2022. My long-term perspective has allowed me to understand the shifting nature of support for Jubilee in a region of central Kenya, and the way the rising cost of living shaped discontent towards Uhuru specifically as someone deemed responsible for the state of the economy.

My approach to the practicalities of fieldwork has involved a mixture of participant observation—spending time with people in their homes, participating in the minutiae of everyday life and watching hours of Premier League football at local bars—and semi-structured interviews. My aim was to observe and elaborate on what anthropologist Sally Falk Moore has called 'diagnostic events', which 'reveal ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions', including how interlocutors reflect upon them.<sup>15</sup> These events could be anything from an argument to a full-on political rally, and the campaign period was full of them. Political happenings at a wider scale - shifting party alliances and news stories of corruption - also triggered animated debates amongst voters that reflect what Grace Musila has called

12. E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present* 50, 1 (1971), pp. 76–136.

13. All translations given are my own, and whilst the translations of certain terms have been discussed with my interlocutors in Kiambu, I take responsibility for inaccuracies. Throughout the piece, terms in Gĩkũyũ are underlined, whilst Kiswahili and Sheng have been italicized.

14. County Government of Kiambu, 'Employment and other sources of income', <<https://kiambu.go.ke/employment-and-other-sources-of-income/>> (10 November 2021).

15. Sally Falk Moore, 'Explaining the present: Theoretical dilemmas in processual ethnography', *American Ethnologist* 14, 4 (1987), pp. 727–736.

‘epistemic archives’, alternative modes of knowing politics difficult to otherwise glimpse from newspaper and television reportage alone.<sup>16</sup> Musila’s emphasis on rumour and the permeable and unfinished nature of political knowledge shapes my account’s emphasis on debate and critique from the grassroots. This article sets out to evoke the texture of sentiments permeating the ground, especially by describing the perspectives of young men in this political landscape. In particular, this article draws on research with two groups of ‘hustling’ youth in their early to mid-20s: (1) members of a youth football team called Star Boyz with whom I played throughout my fieldwork and (2) a group of men from Chungwa, youths who spent their time ‘in the street’, working as petty drug dealers or as lookouts for local bars selling illicit brews. All of my research interlocutors are anonymized and consented to participation in my research. My questions about their relationship with money and politics became a source of interest for them, constantly taking my thinking in new and unexpected directions.

*‘Hustler’ populism, or anti-Kenyatta ‘backlash’?*

*‘Yule kijana anatanga-tanga* [That young boy is wandering around aimlessly]’. Uhuru Kenyatta’s disparaging comment on Ruto’s ‘wandering around’ in central Kenya fired the starting gun on Kenya’s 2022 election campaigns back in 2018. His somewhat disparaging words were spoken publicly and evoked Ruto’s attempts to ingratiate himself with Kikuyu notables, having a sexual connotation of ‘sleeping around’ in search of economic support. They telegraphed his anticipation of Ruto’s politicking, that the Deputy President was preparing for a presidential bid at the 2022 elections way ahead of time. However, it also signalled the split in the heart of the Jubilee Party government that had won the 2017 elections and the end of the personal alliance between Ruto and Uhuru as its dual figureheads.<sup>17</sup> Uhuru and Ruto’s Jubilee Alliance, with its ‘Handshake’ image and ‘We are together’ (*‘Tuko Pamoja’*) slogan, was not only designed to draw a line under 2007–2008 post-election violence between their respective Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities in the Rift Valley. It was a vehicle for electoral victory under Kenya’s 2010 Constitution whose provisions necessitate the making of larger-scale ethno-nationalist alliances under the logic that a winner needs a ‘50 plus 1’ share of the vote, a deliberate attempt to discourage ethnic politics and encourage coalition building.<sup>18</sup>

16. Grace A. Musila, ‘Navigating epistemic disarticulations’, *African Affairs* 116, 465 (2017), pp. 692–704.

17. Gabrielle Lynch, ‘Electing the “alliance of the accused”’: The success of the Jubilee Alliance in Kenya’s Rift Valley’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 1 (2014), pp. 93–114.

18. See David Ndi, ‘Of the Limuru Hunt, land and the Luo bogeyman’, *Daily Nation*, 23 September 2016, <<https://nation.africa/kenya/oped/opinion/of-limuru-hunt-land-and-luo>

The origin of the split had come months before in the form of President Uhuru Kenyatta's now-famous 'Handshake' with his former opponent and long-time rival for the presidency, Raila Odinga. Following the 2017 elections, the former enemies had turned allies, ostensibly in a bid to bring peace to Kenya after a period of protracted political uncertainty largely created by Raila's refusal to accept his defeat in the poll. Standing together on the steps of the State House, Uhuru politely referred to his former opponent as 'my brother' as they shook hands for the cameras, thus announcing their intention to move beyond the 'tribalism' that had defined their rivalry in the 2013 and 2017 elections when they had both courted Kikuyu and Luo voters, respectively.

Beyond its veneer of civility, the much-broadcast political ritual of the two former enemies shaking hands was seen by many as a means of freezing out the upstart Ruto. The 'Handshake' triggered Uhuru's and Raila's attempt to alter Kenya's 2010 Constitution and expand the number of executive positions in the government to include multiple deputy-president roles and a prime minister. The 'Building Bridges Initiative', as it was known, was seen as an attempt by Uhuru to bring Raila formally into the government, though it was eventually struck down by Kenya's Supreme Court as unconstitutional.<sup>19</sup>

Finding himself excluded by this new alliance at the heart of Kenya's politics, Ruto's campaign effectively began. He responded by turning up the anti-elite rhetoric, rhetoric that spoke of an elite more concerned with protecting its own entrenched interests than representing those of ordinary voters. 'Vijana wapate kazi, ama viongozi wapate vyeo? [Should the youth get jobs, or leaders get seats?]', Ruto asked on the campaign trail. He cast Uhuru and Raila as 'dynasties'—a reference to their respective fathers Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya's first prime minister after independence) and Odinga Odinga (Kenya's first vice-president and thereafter a key opposition figure to Jomo Kenyatta). But crucially, the term also evoked the immense wealth of the two families, especially in land. Framing the 2022 elections as a struggle against the influence of this wealth on politics itself, Ruto alleged a desire on the part of Uhuru and Raila to dominate at the expense of democracy, to achieve continuity in their political power through constitutional change and economic hegemony. In this context, he presented a vote for his Kenya Kwanza alliance of parties not just as a vote against economic failure but as an expression of resistance towards this hegemony. Ruto's

bogeyman/440808-3392860-view-asAMP-dotga1z/index.html?\_\_twitter\_impression=true> (10 November 2021).

19. *BBC News Africa*, 'Kenya's BBI blocked in blow to President Uhuru Kenyatta', 31 March 2022, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-60941860>> (3 November 2022).



campaign described how the ‘deep state’ was against him, a way of suggesting the entrenched interests of these families would stop any attempt by him to acquire power democratically.

As Ruto’s ‘Hustler Nation’ narrative gained traction, a raft of journalists, commentators and pundits in Kenya and beyond sought to explain the origin and significance of what appeared to be a new class-like dynamic in the country’s politics, a movement born of burgeoning economic discontent rather than the ethno-nationalist alliances that have typically been shown to characterize Kenyan elections.<sup>20</sup> ‘Will populism trump tribalism in 2022?’, Daniel Okuma asked in the *Daily Star* in December 2020, noting Ruto’s savvy creation of an ‘Us vs Them’ narrative that has allowed him to speak across regional and ethnic boundaries, channelling the deep economic frustrations sewn into the fabric of an unequal Kenya.

Similar debates elsewhere can illuminate what appeared distinctive to Kenyan commentators about Ruto’s hustler message in 2020. The anticipation of Ruto’s ‘populism’ echoed the sorts of analyses scholars have made of electoral politics in Zambia over the last three decades and the rise and fall of Michael Sata’s Patriotic Front. Nic Cheeseman and Miles Larmer described how Sata’s original bid for power in 2006 channelled a broad narrative of exclusion felt by different communal groups and economic strata across rural and urban divides, fusing them together into a mass ‘ethnopolitism’.<sup>21</sup> At the heart of this ethnopolitism was the capacity of certain narratives and concepts—precisely like the ‘hustler’—to conjoin and mobilize independent struggles into a singular movement. In a separate piece, Larmer and Alastair Fraser demonstrated Sata’s strategic use of a Laclau-like left populism, uniting Zambians around a common set of economic grievances. Undoubtedly, Ruto’s strategy has been similar.<sup>22</sup> To create a broad alliance across ethno-nationalist boundaries, Ruto has cultivated a narrative of economic discontent that has allowed him to reach beyond particularistic ethno-nationalist concerns.<sup>23</sup>

20. See, e.g. John Ocho, *Undercurrents of ethnic conflict in Kenya* (Brill, Leiden, 2002); Gabrielle Lynch, *I say to you: Ethnic politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011); see also, Michael Bratton and Mwangi S. Kimenyi, ‘Voting in Kenya: Putting ethnicity in perspective’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, 2 (2008), pp. 272–289.

21. Nic Cheeseman and Miles Larmer, ‘Ethnopolitism in Africa: Opposition mobilization in diverse and unequal societies’, *Democratization* 22, 1 (2015), pp. 22–50.

22. Miles Larmer and Alastair Fraser, ‘Of cabbages and King Cobra: Populist politics and Zambia’s 2006 election’, *African Affairs* 106, 425 (2007), pp. 611–637.

23. Compare with: Peter Lockwood, ‘“Before there is power, there is the country”: Civic nationalism and political mobilisation amongst Kenya’s opposition coalitions, 2013–2018’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 57, 4 (2019), pp. 541–561.

However, as Fraser has argued, these perspectives have the tendency to empty 'populism' of any meaning or content beyond the sense in which economic issues rise to the fore in a given political setting.<sup>24</sup> Danielle Resnick's research on populism in Zambia conceptualized the term as a straightforward turn towards economic policies that attracted voters from the young urban poor.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Cheeseman's concern has been whether the 'populism' such as that embodied by Sata might constitute a break with ethno-nationalist politics so characteristic of the continent, heralding a new 'ethnically blind' politics.<sup>26</sup>

In these accounts populism has generally been studied as a strategy consciously exploited by politicians, weakening populism's valence as an analytical concept and sometimes blurring its boundaries with technocratic programmatic politics. Where populism's appeal to a sense of political exclusion has been clearly elaborated, as in Dan Paget's insightful account of John Magufuli's 'elitist plebeianism' in Tanzania, the focus has rested upon leaders and their charismatic capacity to mobilize through appeal to notions of 'the common people'.<sup>27</sup> Whilst the top-down study of political leadership remains an important focus, what disappears from these approaches to populism is a sense of the popular thought and debate concealed by high political rhetoric or by too technical, policy-oriented understanding of what constitutes and orientates voter-politician linkages.

To the extent that Ruto's campaign can be called populist, it evokes not only the strategic offering of policy reform nor simply the charismatic authority of Sata's Laclau-like conjuring of an excluded trans-ethnic, class-based alliance. Crucially, it also channelled popular moral outcry towards the Jubilee government's economic failure. Such 'backlash', as I call it here, ought to be thought of as a political motivation animated by feelings of betrayal and a frustrated reaction to unmet promises including the associated assumptions of entrenched elites that they can continue to govern regardless. It evokes the feeling on the part of voters that such elites see elections as little more than a consensus-gathering exercise, a brief blip in their dominance where consent from the majority is perfunctory.

These types of political affect are now associated with the types of 'populism' described in northern Europe and the USA and most commonly associated with the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US elections and the Brexit referendum in the UK. Social anthropologists have been at the

24. Alastair Fraser, 'Post-populism in Zambia: Michael Sata's rise, demise and legacy', *International Political Science Review* 38, 4 (2017), pp. 456–472.

25. Danielle Resnick, *Urban poverty and party populism in African democracies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013).

26. Cheeseman, 'Populism in Africa and the potential for an "ethnically blind" politics', p. 358.

27. Dan Paget, 'Mistaken for populism: Magufuli, ambiguity and elitist plebeianism in Tanzania', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26, 2 (2021), pp. 121–141.

forefront of this engaged research with ordinary voters, capturing the sorts of grassroots sentiments that fuelled these high political outcomes. Insa Koch, for instance, conducted long-term field research on a London housing estate to reveal how Brexit voters 'perceived it as an opportunity to say no to [...] politicians in Westminster and Brussels' who were otherwise seen as uncaring and disinterested as evidenced by their utter absence from local political matters relevant to their estate.<sup>28</sup>

Rather than the instrumentalization of ideology or the strategic use of narrative, 'backlash' aims to record how political dispositions shift at the grassroots. It evokes a counter-vailing political tendency, anti-elite 'sentiments' of disappointment and betrayal that point towards the unmet expectations that provoked them. In line with Mudde and Kaltwasser's call to study the 'demand side' of populism, the concept of 'backlash' shifts the focus away from political leadership and towards the articulation of moral injustice that drives membership in such movements.<sup>29</sup> It responds to Margaret Canovan's earlier call for the qualitative study of the diverse 'social bases' that underpin populism in its relative contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Insofar as 'backlash' describes sentiments that germinate at the margins of mainstream politics, boiling forth at critical moments, it can also be likened to E. P. Thompson's notion of 'social protest'—when moral relationships are severed, and a feeling of resentment sets in.<sup>31</sup> Thompson's historical account of food riots in eighteenth-century England illuminated the sense of 'outrage' provoked amongst the poor by merchants and millers who were seen to conspire towards the rising price of bread, breaking a 'consensus' about its ordinarily fair price. Though anchored half a world and practically two centuries away, Thompson's classic work on 'moral economy' can be used to articulate the tacit promises and relationships forged between voters and elites at the ballot box, not least the economic expectations they etch into an accepted paternalism. Thompson's concept is especially useful for its connotations of class position and expectations of redistribution and care within hierarchies. It connotes the relations of accepted paternalism that held 'hustlers' and 'dynasties' together before they were prized apart by the failures of the latter's perceived political neglect. Critically, it allows us to articulate the making of the 'moral force' that drives anti-elite sentiment in populism, as Mudde and Kaltwasser

28. Insa Koch, 'What's in a vote? Brexit beyond culture wars', *American Ethnologist* 44, 2 (2017), pp. 225–230.

29. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 'Populism and (liberal) democracy', p. 10.

30. Margaret Canovan, 'Two strategies for the study of populism', *Political Studies* 30, 4 (1982), pp. 544–552.

31. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', pp. 76–136.

describe it,<sup>32</sup> when these pacts are broken, thus constituting an ‘outrage to moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation’.<sup>33</sup>

As I will show, in central Kenya, the anti-Jubilee backlash originated from a basic assumption and, indeed, an optimism: that Uhuru meant to create prosperity and yet failed to do so whilst enriching himself in the process. What is more, Kenyatta’s perceived attempt to court voters—to ‘use’ them, as they saw it—provoked further animosity. To speak of ‘backlash’ against established elites in central Kenya allows us to understand how incumbencies lose traction because their claims to care for voters, their promises of public goods, wear thin. Seen through this lens, what appears to be a new phenomenon—in this case, Ruto’s hustler populism—can be seen as the culmination of a slow sea-shift in voters’ opinion operating behind the veil of recent electoral results. Ruto’s yellow wave conceals the ‘silent revolution’ beneath, comparable with Hangala Siachiwena’s discussion of the Patriotic Front’s ebbing support in Zambia across the preceding decade.<sup>34</sup> But the interpretive study of political backlash also allows us to illuminate the unwritten social agreements that underpin voter–politician relations in the first place.

With this approach in place, I now turn my attention back towards central Kenya, also known as Kikuyuland, which had provided Uhuru’s Jubilee with its most reliable base of votes in the 2013 and 2017 elections. The home region of ethnic Kikuyu like Kenyatta himself, in both those polls Kikuyu voters had been encouraged to support Uhuru against his two-time opponent Raila Odinga through the political mobilisation of intense xenophobia directed towards Raila and members of his Luo ethnicity. Elections in 2013 and 2017 followed the established pattern of ethno-nationalist blocs competing for power at the heart of the state with Kikuyu mobilizing *en masse* to put into the statehouse a co-ethnic ‘kingpin’.<sup>35</sup> However, beyond sheer ‘tribalism’, Kenyatta also styled himself as a youth politician, one who cared ‘for’ youths and would lift them out of poverty.<sup>36</sup> Through his language, promising ‘prosperity for all’ and massive job creation, he raised expectations for enhanced economic opportunity, that Kenyans would see their personal fortunes improve under his government.<sup>37</sup>

32. Mudde and Kaltwasser, ‘Populism and (liberal) democracy’, p. 8.

33. Thompson, ‘The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century’, p. 79.

34. Hangala Siachiwena, ‘A silent revolution: Zambia’s 2021 general election’, *Journal of African Elections* 20, 2 (2021), pp. 32–56.

35. John O. Ouko, *Undercurrents of ethnic conflict in Kenya*; Lynch, *I say to you*.

36. Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, ‘“Power to Uhuru”: Youth identity and generational politics in Kenya’s 2002 Elections’, *African Affairs* 105, 418 (2006), pp. 51–75.

37. Jubilee Alliance, ‘Transforming Kenya: Security Kenya’s prosperity, 2013–2017 (coalition manifesto)’, <<https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3.sourceafrica.net/documents/119133/Jubilee-Manifesto-2013.pdf>> (3 November 2022).

By 2022, Uhuru's star had faded in central Kenya. For most who voted for Jubilee, none of the promises of prosperity ever materialized. Meanwhile, in the pages of the *Daily Nation*, newspaper stories of government corruption continued to mount, shaping perceptions of Jubilee as Kenya's 'most corrupt government ever' in the popular imagination, giving rise to a bitter sense amongst citizens (sometimes described collectively using the first name 'Wanjiku') that whilst politicians 'ate money', they continued to suffer everyday hardships. In the run-up to the 2022 election, President Uhuru rushed to complete infrastructure projects like the new Nairobi expressway, an attempt to secure his 'legacy' and a positive disposition towards his new ally Raila Odinga, now the head of Azimio la Umoja, an alliance of parties that included what remained of Jubilee. Despite Uhuru's late flurry of activity, many in central Kenya had come to associate the Jubilee Party's twilight years with the economic malaise produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and then, by early 2022, an increasing cost of living.

### *Economic betrayal in central Kenya*

Karis had been provoked. A 26-year-old youth from the town of Chungwa and one of my teammates from the Star Boyz football team, Karis found himself arguing with an Azimio la Umoja's supporter as we made our way home from training on a Tuesday night amongst the tea plantations, heading towards the hill town of Rori near Chungwa. After arriving from the football field in Rori, we decided to go to 'Njuguna's place', a small shack run by the eponymous 40-year-old to eat some cheap bean and potato stew. Once we were inside, we found Njuguna holding forth.

'It's better we elect the older one who has a big vision and determination for tomorrow, so our future is better *kuliko sasa* [than now]', Njuguna said proudly, projecting his intention to vote for Raila Odinga's Azimio la Umoja. By August 2022, Njuguna would have an enormous poster of Odinga himself on his restaurant's wall.

Karis decided to challenge him, speaking up in loud Gĩkũyũ, decrying the rising price of food. 'Is this the future you have kept for us [Nĩ future ñno mũtũigiire haha ũguo]? You are selling us things like you are frustrating us!'

Njuguna responded bluntly, claiming that the economic problems Kenya faced were, in fact, 'global' ones, and that Raila and Uhuru were hardly to blame for the rise in food prices.

Karis was having none of it. Switching to English to match Njuguna and then to Kiswahili, he continued his tirade. 'It's that thing you are calling handshake!', he shouted in mock anger. 'Handshake my foot!' 'This idiocy of the Handshake is what brought us these problems! [*Hii ujinga ya handshake ndio imetuletea hii masaibu bana!*]'.

Karis' anger towards the machinations of Odinga and Kenyatta, and his association of their 'Handshake' alliance in 2018 with rising commodity prices, captures the attitude of young Kiambu voters that I knew at the end of Jubilee's reign. Throughout 2022, voters impressed upon me their desire to vote for Ruto out of discontent with Jubilee, citing Jubilee's unmet promises of jobs, especially for the youth. Meanwhile, Ruto's promise of 'bottom-up' economics spoke directly to the interests of men like Karis whose lives were lived 'just struggling' (no *kūgeria*) in the informal economy. His income derived from working sporadically on construction sites on the outskirts of Nairobi, where he could earn 500 Kenyan Shilling (practically 5 US\$) per day at best, Karis was emblematic of the 'hustler' demographic to whom Ruto appealed. He told me how he hoped Ruto would promote the 'growth of *mwananchi wa kawaida*' (ordinary people), providing 'youths loans to build themselves' and 'helping people who are down to go up in terms of development'.

Such men had seen very little tangible benefit from 10 years of Jubilee government and by 2021 were looking to Ruto's campaign and its promises aimed at precisely their privations. Isah was a 22-year-old youth from Chungwa town, a passionate hip-hop artist and an irrepressible character, someone who loved to discuss politics and his predicament of roving around unemployed 'in the street' as he did throughout my doctoral fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. Back then, he had been an enthusiastic supporter of Uhuru Kenyatta. But in 2021, he voted for the candidate of Ruto's United Democratic Alliance (UDA) in a local bye-election. Describing his reorientation towards Ruto, he explained to me over a WhatsApp call in June 2021 how he and his friends were now planning to vote for UDA:

*Sisi ndio tunataka tuendele, tuende mbele. Sa tunataka hustler, hustler atuongoze kijana mdogo* [We want to prosper, move forward. Now we want a hustler, a hustler to lead us, a young man].

As much as the prospect of a 'hustler' government, however, his decision was animated by a feeling that Uhuru had neglected men like himself, that he cared little for their material struggles patching together a living from odd jobs, as he and his peer group did. 'Uhuru is a rich kid [*ni babi*]!', he insisted to me on the phone in 2021. 'He doesn't understand poverty [*Hajui. Hajui shida*]'.

The resonance of Ruto's hustler idiom with men like Isah and Karis illuminates local perceptions of Jubilee's political failure, and Kenyatta's personal one, to help ordinary people in central Kenya. Since the party's re-election in 2017, voters had grown irate. Jubilee had campaigned aggressively in Kiambu, using fear of Raila Odinga's presidency to encourage voters to give them '*tano tena*' (5 more years) in office. In Kiambu, my

interlocutors articulated fears that Raila and his Luo followers would expropriate businesses and wealth from the Kikuyu community, seeking revenge for their perceived economic dominance. Mwaura, the then 20-year-old son of my host family, described Uhuru's campaign as: 'He pressed the tribe button'.

Uhuru himself rarely promised the sort of direct economic redistribution to his Kikuyu followers that scholars have come to associate with ethno-nationalism and the advantage voters see in adhering to its logic at the ballot box. What Uhuru did commit to—or appeared to from the perspective of his supporters—was creating an environment of economic stability and relative opportunity. As one of my interlocutors, a 50-year-old taxi driver from Ituura told me, 'Uhuru has done nothing for me. But I want a peaceful environment so I can work'.

Instead, fuel value-added tax increases, and the uncertainty caused by the election period itself created economic malaise.<sup>38</sup> In the aftermath of the elections, men like Isah and Karis struggled to find work on local construction sites, remaining unemployed for long stretches of time. When I returned to Ituura in 2019, I noticed how shortages of cash ground down my hosts and friends and their optimism for the future. 'Everyone here is broke man!', Mwaura, the now 22-year-old son of my host family, now a recent graduate, explained to me. After leaving university he struggled to find work and often found himself 'idling', as he called it, on his parents' homestead, bored and broke. '*Hakuna kazi* [There are no jobs]' became a refrain of his parents, who looked past his particular disappointments and towards the responsibility of Uhuru to improve the general situation.

By 2021, Jubilee voters I knew claimed they had been 'brainwashed' by 'hate speech' or noted that they simply had no choice but to vote against Raila because of fears of violence.<sup>39</sup> It was little wonder to me that they might lose faith in the benefits that ethno-nationalist loyalties were meant to have conferred and therefore might think to change what was once 'their' government. Mwaura sent a WhatsApp voice message to me in late 2018:

Man, this *tano tena* [i.e., five more years of Jubilee] – it's shit. The economy is becoming like, it's becoming unbearable. I think by the end of 2018 we will not be able to afford anything. Like the fuel prices are high. The cost of living like – fuck! I mean, that's the worst decision I've ever made in my life to vote for Uhuru Kenyatta again.

38. Dauti Kahura, 'Uthamaki, God and the economy: "*Tano Tena*" fails to deliver the Kingdom of Prosperity', *The Elephant*, 18 October 2018, <<https://www.theelephant.info/features/2018/10/18/uthamaki-god-and-the-economy-tano-tena-fails-to-deliver-the-kingdom-of-prosperity/>> (4 November 2022).

39. Dominic Burbidge, "'Can someone get me outta this middle class zone?'" Pressures on middle class Kikuyu in Kenya's 2013 Election', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, 2 (2014), pp. 205–25.

All of this paved the way for Ruto's campaign. In 2021, bye-election results in southern Kiambu fuelled the sense that central Kenya would 'flip', turning towards Ruto's campaign, and away from their ethno-nationalist loyalties. Ruto's UDA party achieved two significant victories in peri-urban areas of central Kenya, one in Juja in May 2021, and another in the Kiambaa constituency in July 2021 close to where research for this paper was carried out.<sup>40</sup> Ruto, a Kalenjin, won over unemployed, 'hustling' Kikuyu voters from these peri-urban areas by speaking directly to their economic interests whilst capitalizing on perceptions of Uhuru's neglect of his own ethnic group. As one of my interlocutors from Kiambaa put it:

Uhuru does not do any developments in Central Kenya. Even in Gatundu [a village in Kiambu County] where he is from, there are no changes. The roads in Gatundu are bad, and they just recently got connected to electricity in their mud houses. Uhuru is promoting development in other regions. Ruto will think of encouraging developments here because he is not from here and because he wants to make us happy, like Uhuru is developing other regions to appease to them.<sup>41</sup>

The lack of care towards their interests shaped an appreciation of the social distance between themselves and Uhuru on the part of voters. Frustration with Jubilee played into Ruto's narrative about uncaring 'dynasties', their economic and political interests far removed from the concerns of ordinary Kenyans.

*'Uhuru is state capture!'—disgust with horse-trading politics and elite accumulation*

Against this backdrop, Uhuru's endorsement of Raila's presidential bid in 2022 tainted the latter's campaign irrevocably. As Mwangela Kamencu has argued, Raila's unpopularity in central Kenya was always going to be a major challenge for Azimio, even with ethnic Kikuyu deputy Martha Karua at his side.<sup>42</sup> A history of animosity dating back to the colonial period and two elections in 2013 and 2017 pitting Kikuyu against Raila's Luo have shaped his immense unpopularity in the region. Whilst prejudice towards Raila's Luo ethnicity has hardly dimmed in central Kenya, what I noticed during my fieldwork in 2022 was that Raila

40. Declan Galvin and Simon Mutie, 'Kenya's "Hustler movement" marches on', *Democracy in Africa*, 23 July 2021, <<http://democracyinafrica.org/author/declan-galvin-and-simon-mutie/>> (9 November 2021).

41. Interview, Kiambu male, 27 years old, September 2021.

42. Mwangela Kamencu, 'How Ruto won', *The Continent*, 20 August 2022, <[https://www.thecontinent.org/\\_files/ugd/287178\\_f75b144f1f834538b1e2ae649b842dda.pdf?index=true](https://www.thecontinent.org/_files/ugd/287178_f75b144f1f834538b1e2ae649b842dda.pdf?index=true)> (3 February 2023).



had gained a new malign status as an ‘Uhuru project’, that his ‘Handshake’ association with the unpopular Kenyatta had overwritten deeper political history. Raila appeared as little more than a continuity candidate, a mere placeholder for ongoing dominance by the Kenyatta family, and a vehicle for his ongoing influence in Kenya’s politics. ‘It will be like Uhuru is still the President’, one voter told me. Or, as another put it:

The project Uhuru has made with Raila is for him to still be in control of the government. Plus, why should I vote for Raila when we have evidence of how Uhuru has destroyed our country through the current economy?<sup>43</sup>

Tapping into the discontent, Ruto’s ‘hustler vs dynasties’ message was an ingenious way of signalling a desire to distribute wealth and opportunity in a way central voters felt Jubilee never had.

To the extent these sentiments were widespread, they should not be seen as the product of instrumentalist high political rhetoric alone, so much as a harnessing of wider discourses that questioned elite hegemony in the wake of the ‘Handshake’.<sup>44</sup> It was not only that formerly opposed politicians like Uhuru and Raila had closed ranks but that their alliance signalled a deep cynicism at the heart of Kenya’s elite-level politics, one of which voters themselves were keenly aware. Uhuru’s ongoing attempts to court voters to Azimio in 2022—that he could ‘use’ them, as one of my interlocutors described it—turned views of him even more sour.

The brazen instrumentalism of Kenyatta appalled voters precisely because he appeared intent upon further entrenching his privileged access to the state to accumulate vast riches. ‘Go to Naivasha – Kenyatta! Mombasa – Kenyatta!’, one voter in Kiambu told me, evoking widespread knowledge circulating in Kenya about the immense wealth of the Kenyatta family.<sup>45</sup> The business interests of the Kenyatta are well-documented, especially those in the dairy industry via Brookside Milk and in banking via the Commercial Bank of Africa.<sup>46</sup> Their interests transcend Kenya too. The Pandora Papers leak revealed that the family was linked to offshore companies worth millions of dollars.<sup>47</sup> Rather than documenting these

43. 25-year-old female voter. Fieldnotes, Kiambu County, 30 July 2022.

44. Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Karuti Kanyinga, ‘Kenya: Why elite cohesion is more important than ethnicity to political stability’, *The Conversation*, 20 February 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/kenya-why-elite-cohesion-is-more-important-than-ethnicity-to-political-stability-131937>> (4 November 2022).

45. Fieldnotes, 3 August 2022.

46. *Business Daily Africa*, ‘Mama Ngina, Biwott in Africa billionaires list’, 8 October 2013, <<https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/corporate/companies/mama-ngina-biwott-in-africa-billionaires-list-2043010>> (12 October 2022).

47. *BBC News Africa*, ‘Pandora Papers: Uhuru Kenyatta family’s secret assets exposed by leak’, 4 October 2021, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58775944>> (12 October 2022).

business interests, however, what I want to focus on here is the way such knowledge circulated amongst ordinary voters during the election campaign. As 2022 wore on, anti-Kenyatta sentiment coalesced around the question of accumulation—specifically their rapid and much-commented-upon accumulation of business and property interests across the county. These questions were primarily encoded in the notion of ‘state capture’.

‘We will deal firmly and decisively with entrenched, chronic corruption that has taken over institutions and turned the whole country into state capture’, Ruto indicated in a BBC interview in July 2019.<sup>48</sup> Ruto’s words changing the language of corruption oriented around the notion of ‘state capture’. When asked what ‘state capture’ was, Ruto’s running-mate for Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua claimed characterized it as: ‘people in power who have used or are using their offices to use up public resources to their advantage’.<sup>49</sup> The UDA manifesto conjured the legacy of J. M. Kariki (1929–1975), MP for Nyandarua and socialist, who was assassinated during Jomo Kenyatta’s Presidency after warning of the country’s transformation into ‘a nation of 10 millionaires and 10 million beggars’, remarking that this was precisely what they referred to as ‘state capture’.

But more than corruption alone, state capture evoked the broader sense that it was the Kenyatta family specifically that had used its privileged access to the state to control vast sectors of the economy. This was not so much the capture of the state by elite networks than it was the use of privileged access to the state to capture everything else. Turning to a final ethnographic situation can illustrate the groundswell of criticism towards the Kenyatta family, even in his own electoral heartlands, and from the young let-down hustlers Ruto sought to court.

It was early August 2022, and the elections were just around the corner. I had returned to Kenya to follow the election period. As usual, my friendships with local youth from the rural outskirts of Chungwa drew me back into their orbit. Instead of searching for a campaign rally, I found myself sitting with my young friends from the Star Boyz football team with whom I had played since 2017 when I had followed their exploits in local football leagues (occasionally appearing as a player myself) whilst recording aspects of their lives and livelihoods for my doctoral fieldwork. In the midst of the afternoon heat, at a tournament organized by a local church, the players took a moment to rest whilst another set of teams continued to play in front of us.

48. *BBC News Africa*, ‘Kenya election 2022: William Ruto on corruption and state capture’, 19 July 2022, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-62219044>> (12 October 2022).

49. Betty Njeru, ‘William Ruto to deal with “State capture” if elected president’, *The Standard*, August 2022, <<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001450910/ruto-to-deal-with-state-capture-if-elected-president>> (12 October 2022).

Provoked by my questions about voting intention at that critical moment, Matu, a 23-year-old youth from the team, declared to me and his Star Boyz teammates that it was his intention to vote for Azimio, citing what he saw as their clear agenda. By contrast, he characterized Ruto as just a ‘sweet talker’, someone with the capacity to ‘steal’ (kūiya) wealth from state coffers.

Amongst his friends, Matu was in the minority. Like Njuguna, who we met earlier, he was quickly confronted by his peers who saw his support for Azimio as an indication that he continued to support Uhuru. ‘These ones are in Azimio because of Uhuru [Aya me Azimio tondū wa Uhuru]’, Simon, a 27-year-old youth from the team explained to me. ‘They are just following Uhuru’. A young father with a job at a bank, Simon was someone who often celebrated his own work ethic, and the modicum of economic success he recognized it had brought him. Renting in Chungwa town with his wife and child, Simon emphasized not only on his economic and social independence but also on the effort it took him to maintain it. Meanwhile, Matu worked on local construction sites and continued to live on his parents’ homestead. Despite his relative prosperity, however, Simon was a vociferous critic of the Kenyattas and inequality in Kenya since I had first met him in 2017. Back then, he had described Kenya as a country ‘just for rich people’ and had become utterly cynical at the end of the campaign season, when Uhuru’s Jubilee secured ‘another five years’ (*tano tena*). In Ruto’s campaign, he saw an opportunity for a different sort of leader. ‘At least he understands how being poor feels’, he told me separately.

That day in August, however, he began marshalling arguments about the immense wealth of the Kenyatta family.

‘They’ve taken everything, Matu, and you guys can’t see you’ve been brainwashed. [Magirite hau na mūtirona mūkihūdhirirwo hakiri ũguo]’, Simon argued, speaking directly to Matu. ‘Kira kindū nī aragūra [He’s buying-up everything]’, interjected Simiyu, the 28-year-old Gikuyu-speaking Luhya, the son of labour migrants who played as a defender, speaking of Uhuru. Like Matu, Simiyu’s income was mostly derived from odd jobs. He was a ‘hustler’ as much as Matu.

Simon began listing businesses that belonged to ‘Uhuru’. ‘M-shwari nī Uhuru! [M-shwari is Uhuru’s!]’, he said, referring to the savings and loan app provided by state-backed company Safaricom. Knowing the number of Kenyans who paid heavy interest on loans repaid to the company through the app, Simon effectively evoked Uhuru’s status as a lender extraordinaire, indebting Kenyans on a massive scale.<sup>50</sup> ‘Brookside is theirs [nī yao]’, he

50. Kevin Donovan and Emma Park, ‘Perpetual Debt in the Silicon Savannah’, *The Boston Review*, 20 September 2019, <<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/kevin-p-donovan-emma-park-tk/>> (14 February 2023).

continued, referring to the milk brand sold in practically all supermarkets. Simiyu echoed Simon's sentiments, declaring that 'Uhuru is state capture!' is a mixture of Gikuyu and English (Uhuru nĩ state capture!).

Simon's words echoed a wider questioning of the wealth of the Kenyatta family that has been taking place in the country practically since independence. But in 2022, criticism of Uhuru rested on the idea that he had accumulated whilst his loyal voters had struggled to provide for themselves and their own families—that they had put him in power only to 'eat money'. However, it was not only his accumulation of businesses but also his power over services and commodities that fomented this anger since it effectively allowed him to make money from citizens directly. The Kenyatta family's economic dominance gave rise to a sense amongst Kikuyu voters like Simon that they were living with an oligarchy that generated wealth at their personal expense. A sense of economic injustice animated an intention to remove Uhuru from office.

'Matu do you now understand the reason we prefer Ruto [nĩ wona wega wa Ruto nĩ kĩ]?', asked Simon.

Ruto is the biggest thief [nĩ mwici] and he steals a lot. But he knows how to fight for the poor citizens and that's why we want Ruto [nĩ oĩ kũũira andũ athĩnĩ na haũ nĩ ho tũrenda Ruto]. Would you prefer someone who steals a piece of land once or someone who will always oppress you for the rest of your life [mũndũ agĩtũire akũnyanyasaga miaka yaku yothe]? Because that's what those people will be doing to us.

What was at stake was not simply an economic betrayal, but the injustice of Uhuru's accumulation whilst men like themselves struggled; the dawning realization that to live in Kenyatta's Kenya was to live a life of pervasive economic exploitation.

### *Conclusion*

If ethno-nationalist identities have so often structured the competition that defines Kenya's presidential elections to the exclusion of class-based antagonisms,<sup>51</sup> then Ruto's victory has brought economic issues to the fore of Kenya's politics in a far more pronounced way than in the previous two election campaigns. Whether this heralds a new politics centred on court- ing a supposed trans-ethnic 'hustler' constituency remains to be seen. But to grasp the significance of his victory, one must look past the appeal to economic interests alone. Ruto's campaign was granted moral force by the

51. Though see, Karuti Kanyinga, 'Ethnicity, patronage and class in a local arena: 'High' and 'low' politics in Kiambu, Kenya, 1982–92', in Peter Gibbon (ed), *New local level politics in East Africa* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 1994), pp. 66–86.

perceived neglect of the Jubilee government. An understanding of the *status quo ante* allows us to see ‘hustler populism’ as a ‘backlash’ against Jubilee and Uhuru Kenyatta’s political person, especially within his own Kikuyu ethnic community.

Viewing Ruto’s victory through the prism of Jubilee’s perceived failures, and Kenyatta’s personal ones, illustrates the significance of political affects in shaping voter–elite relations. Ruto’s victory in the 2022 elections capitalized on a swelling sense of injustice that Kenyatta had used the presidency purely for his own gain. A vote for Kenya Kwanza was a vote to rein in Uhuru’s ‘state capture’ and to reassert independence from him. In this regard, the victory of Ruto and the ‘yellow wave’ in central Kenya bears similarities with northern exhaustion towards liberal elites and third-way economics that promised prosperity but rarely delivered. This was a politics of rejection, one that launched voters into an unknown future. This is not to suggest that the voting decisions of my interlocutors in Kiambu were utterly emotive, but rather that their sense of anger spanned from deeper ideas about what politicians owe voters, and what the boundaries of political morality might in fact be. Ideas of justice, obligation and morality shaped their perspectives towards Uhuru, reminding us that votes for political leaders, co-ethnic or otherwise, are not simply matters of ‘identity’, but living ‘moral economies’, fields of debate and argument within which alliances are made and broken.<sup>52</sup>

All of this suggests that African studies of electoral democracy can continue to derive some of its most potent analyses from the study of the tacit moral assumptions that underpin voter–politician relationships. The turn towards populism in African studies has thus far been too focused on top-down electoral strategy, or the capacity of specific leaders to generate new cross-cutting alliances. But for scholars to understand what drives surprising and sudden electoral victories and political movements that couch their appeal via a radical rupture with the past, the study of populist politics must encompass the moral economies, the discarded social contracts, that once propped-up longer-term incumbencies. Such a focus will entail ethnographic engagement with the sentiments and moral ideas circulating on the ground as much as the rhetoric espoused from the podium, allowing us to understand the origins of outrage, the point at which notions of justice and injustice enter the field of play, their moral languages and political consequences.

52. John Lonsdale, ‘The moral economy of the Mau Mau: Wealth, poverty and civic virtue in Kikuyu political thought’, in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (eds), *Unhappy valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (James Currey, London, 1992), pp. 315–504.