The Foreign Policies of Africa's Personalist Regimes

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Africa's personalist regimes have characteristic and distinctive foreign policy behaviors. Several patterns in their foreign policies can be distinguished from that of other African regime types. Among the set of African personalist regimes, however, there is variation in one important foreign policy area, namely, the propensity to become involved in cross-border interventions against neighboring personalist regimes. This difference in respecting (or not) the norms against inter-state intervention reveals a puzzle in the foreign policies of African personalist regimes: why do some of these regimes respect the norm while others do not?

This paper explores the question in the three sections. The following section presents a description of contemporary African personalist regimes. These personalist regimes have arisen in a different context from that of the 1960s and 1970s, and they have distinctive modes of rule. The second section of this paper describes the foreign policy logic of Africa's personalist regimes, identifying some common patterns of foreign policy behavior. The third section beings by describing a major difference in international relations between two sets of contiguous personalist regimes, in Central Africa and the Great Lakes, respectively. It then attempts to account for this difference, drawing on the discussion in the previous sections.

The Rise and Functioning of African Personalist Regimes

One scholar (Clark 2023: 64) has described Africa's personalist regimes as "those that implicitly stake their legitimacy on the genius, vision, putative courage, or other personal quality of a long-term ruler." Indeed, at the time that personalist rulers take power, they invariably try to convince the political classes that rule their countries and their publics that they possess unusual leadership qualities. Yet many are notably lacking in the charisma that it often

associated with personal rulers. For every energetic and visionary like Paul Kagame (Rwanda) or Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso), there are plenty of other colorless and closed-mind autocrats who rule African countries for decade on end. Cameroon's Paul Biya (president 1982-present) and Gabon's Omar Bongo (president 1967-2009) come to mind. Even personalist rulers who have apparent charisma at the time they seize power, such as Denis Sassou Nguesso (Congo) or Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), often evolve into autocratic managers after decades in power. In some context or another, though, personalist rulers always make some claim to unusual leadership authority when they take power.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the de jure one-party states were in vogue, most African presidents became personalist rulers. In that age, these personalist regimes were well distinguished by the political postures, leadership styles, and personalities of ruling presidents. Accordingly, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) were able to distinguish among four different types of personalist ruler, which they labeled as "Prince," "Autocrat," "Prophet," and "Tyrant." These labels, and other descriptions of leadership style, still have some analytical value, though the current age has virtually eliminated the possibility of the "prophet" in the sense used by Jackson and Rosberg (i.e., visionary or revolutionary).

One useful way to understand contemporary African personalist *regimes* is to contrast them with the two other main regime types in Africa. These two are types are competitive multiparty regimes and one-party dominant regimes. "Competitive multiparty" regimes govern African countries that are experimenting with democratic system. At the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, many African states experimented with democracy, but most of these experiments had failed by the mid 2000s decade (Villalón and VonDoepp 2005). By the 2010s, the only

remaining democratic experiments from the early 1990s were in Benin, Senegal, and Zambia.

Meanwhile, this small set was joined by Nigeria (in 1998) and Ghana (2000). More recently,

Liberia and Sierra Leone have launched democratic experiments, though they appear to be

fragile. The quality of elections in these competitive multiparty regimes can be low (Nigeria) or

quite high (Ghana), but in either case, the leaders regularly change.   The expectation of

leadership change alters the calculation of both domestic and foreign policies.

The third major category of African regimes is the one-party dominant regime. These

regimes are concentrated heavily in southern Africa, but Tanzania (East Africa) and Ethiopia (in

the Horn, under the EPRDF, 1991-2019) are also in this group. For the southern African

countries and Tanzania, the *same political party* has ruled these states since the end of

colonialism or the end of whites-only rule (for South Africa and Zimbabwe). For Botswana (BDP

and Tanzania (CCM) these ruling parties led their countries to independence in the 1960s; for

the former Portuguese colonies, Angola (MPLA) and Mozambique (FRELIMO), the ruling parties

had military wings that fought insurgencies against their erstwhile colonizer; and in Zimbabwe

(ZANU-PF) and South Africa (ANC), the ruling parties ended whites-only rule in 1980 and 1994.[1]

In these countries, the rulers change regularly, but the *ruling parties* do not. This abiding reality

again imbues these states with a distinctive domestic and foreign policy logic.

This tripartite typology accounts for nearly all stable and on-going African regimes. The

use of the qualifiers "stable and on-going" suggests another regime type, the transitional

regime. Transitional arise under a variety of circumstances, but most typically when a

personalist ruler dies or is deposed. Such transitional regimes either serve as a bridge to the

regime of the next personalist ruler or, more rarely, they organize a transition to a democratic

experiment. The only African regime that does not fall into one of these categories is that in Somalia. The regime there is foreign-installed and foreign-supported. It would not last more than a few weeks were foreign support for it to be withdrawn. But it is sui generis on the continent, with all other African regimes falling into one of the three major regime types.

For all regime types in Africa, the fundamental domestic political logic is one of regime security (Whitaker and Clark 2018). Unlike in the Global North and the developed parts of Asia and Latin America, constitutionalism, and the rule of law can rarely be taken for granted in Africa: only a few regimes in African can take for granted the likelihood that that will only be supplanted through constitutional processes. But personalist regimes suffer the threat of regime insecurity in a more existential way than the other regime types, as explained below. For competitive multiparty regimes, the dominant domestic political logic is to satisfy the most important (usually urban) domestic political constituencies. When the broad public is satisfied and economic development is evident, the army is likely to remain in the barracks (Aboagye and Clark 2021) and the ruling party is likely to be re-elected. For one-party dominant regimes, the over-riding domestic political logic is to keep the ruling party safely in power. If individual leaders embarrass or under-perform (as in South Africa and Zimbabwe), they will be politically sacrificed to ensure party rulership. And the fundamental political logic of the personalist regime is to keep the individual ruler securely in power.

Personalist rulers came to power via a variety of pathways that often condition how they manage the challenges to regime security. We usually think of two different pathways to power for personalist rulers. Most often, we think of the senior military officer seizing power from a civilian regime at a time of domestic agitation. And indeed, long-reigning personalist leaders

such as Mobutu Sese Seko (1965-1997), Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), Idriss Déby (1990-2021) among several others originally came to power through military coups d'état. Successful insurgency against unpopular and declining regimes is an equally common pathway to power for such leaders, however, and many of these are also long-reigning. Examples including Yoweri Museveni (Uganda, 1986-present) and Paul Kagame (Rwanda, 1994-present); others such as Laurent Kabila [Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 1997-2001] did not prove to be as durable in power. A third pathway to power is to subvert a free democratic system, a technique familiar to students of Europe and Latin America. Some personalist rulers in Africa followed this path in the 1960s, when the departing colonizers set up democratic systems on their way out; and after the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War re-introduced multipartyism in Africa. One ruler now in the process of undermining democracy and consolidating personal rule is Faustin-Archange Touadéra of the CAR. The fourth pathway to personal rule is to inherit power from one's father. This was the pathway to power for Joseph Kabila (DRC), Ali Bongo (Gabon), and Faure Gnassingbé (Togo), in addition to several kings of Morocco.

Regardless of how they come to power, Africa's personalist regimes effectively function like state-level mafia organizations. Crime family mafias, of course, function *within* states, which provide a larger security and economic framework for criminal operations. Yet the analogy between criminal mafias and African personalist regimes is quite strong, the difference in the level of institutional (sub-state versus state) notwithstanding. The first imperative of a mafia family organization is to maintain itself as the preeminent source of security, or "protection," within a given community; mafias can be threatened both "from above," by the sovereign states in which they function or horizontally, but rival mafias that function in neighboring or

overlapping territories. African personalist regimes face parallel threats to their power: they can be threatened "from above," by the regional or international community, which has the power to overthrow them. Mobutu Sese Seko learned this to his chagrin in 1996, when the OAU effectively gave a green light to Zaire's neighbors to overthrow the Mobutu personalist regime. Personalist regimes often also face challenges from within their state borders: rival political figures can try to mobilize either the broad public or specific ethnic communities to overthrow them. Personal ruler Blaise Compaoré (Burkina Faso) met this fate in October 2014, as did Omar al-Bashir (Sudan) in April 2019. Like mafia family controlling a territory, personalist regime are on constant guard from these threats from above and from other mafias that might seek power.

A specific mafia boss, a "godfather," however, also faces another threat to his power: the threat of displacement from power from *within the family.* Godfathers are often overthrown by members of their own family, from mafia insiders. And so it is with African personalist regimes: personalist dictators must guard against their own regime insiders, who typically harbor ambitions of succession. The most vulnerable mafia bosses are those who grown old and infirm while still in power. Likewise, it is no accident that the likes of Mobutu Sese Seko, Robert Mugabe, Ali Bongo all became vulnerable to coups or revolution once they had lost the mental acuity or energy to operate the levers of repression and patronage effectively. The second two personalist rulers mentioned here were replaced from "within" the ruling syndicate. Mugabe was replaced by a party-insider, Emerson Mnangagwa, whereas Bongo was replaced by a coup-maker, Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, who hailed from the same remote Gabonese region (Haut-Ogooué) as Ali Bongo and Bongo's father (Omar), who ruled Gabon from 1967-2009.

To better understand the distinction between regime insiders and outsiders, we need to appreciate that Africa's personalist regimes all rely disproportionately on some specific identity community within the states that they rule. The mafia equivalent to this is that syndicate crime families have a basis in some ethnic community, like the Irish, Mexican, Russian, and Silician mafias in the United States. As the rulers of plural ethno-cultural states, personalist regimes cannot afford to be an exclusionary as mafia dons, of course; they have to practice "ethnic balancing" in their cabinets and other visible public institutions. They do so, and they maintain a public fiction of ethno-regional neutrality and equity.

But at the *core* of these regimes, one invariably finds members of the personalist ruler's immediate and extended family; old friends from his neighborhood, village, or region; and co-ethnics who may have been born in the capital city, the offspring of migrants from the ruler's home region. The *crucial* positions in a personalist regime include cabinet posts related to security, notably defense and interior; command and intelligence positions in the military, especially the chief of staff and chief of intelligence; and, in the case of resource rich countries, the heads of the leading state-owned or parastatal resource companies. Other posts can safely be occupied by regime outsiders to maintain the thinly veiled claims of equity. Cabinet posts such as the minister of small enterprises or minister of sports; army posts such as the head of the construction unity; or economic posts such as the head of a forestry resource parastatal—all these non-security and non-critical jobs can be entrusted to mafia family outsiders.

Let us illustrate this pattern by reference to the mafia regime of Congolese president Dennis Sassou Nguesso. Sassou has been in power twice, first as a "Marxist" ruler of a one-party state (1979-1991) (Sassou I) and again since 1997 as the ruler of an electoral autocracy

following a five-month civil war (Sassou II). At the center of the Sassou mafia organization are several family members, many with backgrounds in the military or security. The precise composition of this core group has changed over the 27 years of the Sassou II regime, as the needs of the regime change and as the fortunes of individuals rise and fall. In the early years of the regime, the President's cousin, Pierre Oba, previously a minister in the Sassou I regime and a key commander of the Cobra militia in the war of 1997, played key roles. Oba was Minister of Interior and Security from 1997-2002 and then Minister of Security and Police until 2005. Thereafter his influence waned, though he was still Minister of Mines in 2023. Michel Ngakala, a presidential nephew, was the co-creator of the Cobras with Oba, and subsequently served as the High Commissioner for the re-integration of former militia fighters from 2001-2012. A parallel figure from the legal realm is Aimé-Emmanuel Yoka, Sassou's uncle, who served successively as Mayor of Brazzaville (1997-1999), Ambassador to Morocco (1999-2002), Presidential chief of staff (2002-2007), and Minister of Justice (2007-2016). In 2012, Yoka was also elected to the National Assembly, representing a district in the Pool region, far from his hometown of Oyo. Yoka was temporarily out of favor during his ambassadorship, and was dismissed from the cabinet in 2016, though he retains his seat in the Assembly. These once powerful figures lost influence due to perceived independence or advancing age.

Still, the continuity of the regime insiders biologically related to President Sassou is striking. Such figures are involved in both internal security and business, as in a criminal syndicate. All of the following have been influential over at least 16 years of the Sassou II regime: Denis-Christel Sassou, son of the President, nominal army colonel, and leading figure in Congo's oil sector; Jean-Dominique Okemba, presidential nephew, navy admiral, head of

masonic Grand Loge, Chairman of the BGFI Bank, and head of the national security council (in charge of internal state security); Edgard Nguesso, presidential nephew, army colonel, businessman, and manager of the "presidential estate;" Wilfried Nguesso, presidential nephew, businessman, head of the national trading company, and political organizer; Hilare Moko, presidential nephew, admiral, and the head of presidential security from 1997 to 2017; Jean-Jacques Bouya, the son of Sassou's cousin and head of the Ministry of "Grands Travaux" since 2003; and Hugues Ngouélondélé, presidential son-in-law, and Mayor of Brazzaville, 2003 to 2017. These figures all compete fiercely with one another for the attention of President Sassou and regularly attempt to undermine one another's authority. In particular, Okemba has waged fierce internal battles with Moko for the prized post of overseeing presidential security. Sassou has apparently groomed his son Denis-Christel to succeed him as President, though other close family members have also received consideration (Carter 2024: 192). Other African personalist rulers rely similarly on immediate and extended family members.

Although logical and necessary, the over-reliance on family members creates a dilemma for African personalist rulers, as identified by Roessler (2011). The power and privilege of regime insiders inevitably creates powerful resentments among ethno-regional leaders of non-regime groups. Those with no military training or potential can be bought off with access to non-critical posts within the regime, such as secondary cabinet ministries. The dilemma arises, though, with respect to military officers from non-dominant ethno-regional groups. When a personalist leader first seizes or assumes power, he must decide whether to sideline such officers, or not. If he does so, such purged military figures have an incentive to begin insurgencies in "peripheral" parts of the territory, away from the centers of power. Insofar as

they ethno-regional constituencies are willing to join such insurgencies, they can pose major threats to the security of personalist regimes. Alternatively, newly installed personalist rulers may decide to leave key military personal from non-ruling ethno-regional groups in their military posts. In this circumstance, these military figures usually maintain access to military resources and proximity, at least periodic proximity, to the capital city. In this circumstance, many are tempted to plot coups d'état. Thus, personalist rulers inevitably face a high risk of either insurgency or coup, putting their regimes under constant pressure. Nonetheless, it is impressive that so many personalist leaders have mastered the dark arts of taming this dilemma, remaining in power for decades.

To manage the risks that they face from inside their regimes, from inside their territorial states, and from outside their countries, personalist rulers use essentially the same techniques as mafia bosses. First, they create, maintain, and surveil the personal loyalty of blood members of the family and key regime insiders. Once loyalty has been demonstrated, most regime insiders never cross the personalist ruler, and thus, like Pierre Oba and Aimé-Emmanuel Yoka, they remain very close to "the power" over the course of the regime's tenure. Disloyalty leads to humiliation, exile, and/or death.

Second, just like mafia bosses, personalist leaders, once securely in power, spend most of their time engaged in illicit economic activity. For personalist leaders like Sassou, this means the diversion of public funds into private bank accounts, business investments, and real property. The diversion of public money can take place through the taxation system, but it more regularly occurs through the diversion of natural resource revenues. In the case of Congo, the country has exported between $7 and $9 billion annually in petroleum over the last several

years, depending upon the fluctuation in global oil prices (EIA 2023).   The Sassou regime created La Société Nationale des Pétroles du Congo (SNPC) in 1998, the year after Sassou seized power, to tap into this revenue stream. It is no accident that Sassou's son, Dénis-Christel, has played (various) leading roles in the SNPC since 2001. No one can say how many hundreds of millions or billions the Sassou regimes has diverted from this revenue stream, but anti-corruption NGOs have been documenting the theft of public funds for more than 20 years now (see e.g., Global Witness 2004).

Third, African personalist regimes employ as much violence as is necessary to eliminate threats to security. Another purpose of violence is to intimidate would-be regime opponents, military and political. Personalist rulers, like the dons, have long memories, and they often track down and kill their political adversaries, even in exile. The murder of exiled intelligence man Patrick Karegeya in Johannesburg in 2014 (Wrong 2021) is only one of the more visible events of this kind. The use of violence by criminal mafia groups has symbolic and performative aspects, as noted by Nicaso and Danesi (2013). Like mafia dons, personalist rulers work hard to create myths of invincibility and hyper-masculinity, persons who should only be criticized at the risk of death. Long detentions and brutal torture also serve as warnings to those who contemplate opposition. Congolese politician Jean-Marie Michel Makosso was arrested in 2016 for calling for civil disobedience after one of Sassou's fake elections, and he was subsequently sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2018. Human rights organizations have amply documented the frequent use of torture against political opposition figures in Congolese jails. Regime insiders rarely bother to deny torture, either, because they know that the threat of torture keeps would-be political opponents quiet.

The Foreign Policies of Africa's Personalist Regimes

It is important to have a clear understanding of the basis of personal regime rule to understand the foreign policies of personalist regimes. **The overall logic of personalist regimes is to keep the current ruler in power.** It is extremely rare for personalist rulers to give up power voluntarily, the case of Amadou Ahidjo's resignation as President of Cameroon being one of a very few. On the other hand, it is common for personalist leaders to die in office. When this happens, the goal of regime insiders is to put one of their own, often a relative of the deceased ruler, in power. This imperative of maintaining regime security drives both the domestic and foreign policies of these regimes. As in the thinking of Nicolo Machiavelli, there is a scarcely any separation between the ends and means of domestic and foreign policy, as regime maintenance is the lodestar for both.

Because personalist rulers are particularly vulnerable to displacement during their early weeks and months in power, they usually seek an "external guarantor" for their regimes at the outset.[2] During the Cold War era, France served as an external guarantor for the regimes that came to govern most of France's former colonial regimes on the continent. Personalist regimes in the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, and Senegal hosted French military bases their soil, sending a powerful message to regime enemies, foreign and domestic. France also played this role for the Juvénal Habayarimana regime of Rwanda until 1994 and for the Mobutu Sese Seko regime after it was effectively abandoned by the U.S. in 1991. Rwanda and Zaïre are former *Belgian* colonies. Despite their protestations of non-alignment, most other personalist regimes during this time sought the backing of one or the other superpowers. The U.S. served as a guarantor for the Mobutu regime (from 1965 to 1991)

and to a succession of personalist regimes in Liberia, from 1945 to 1990. Meanwhile, the Soviet

Union provided backing to those personalist leaders in Benin, Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia, and

Somalia who make a public commitment Marxism-Leninism or "scientific socialism." The Soviets

also backed the party-dominant regimes that came to power in former Portuguese Africa in the

1970s. Much less ostentatiously, China provided backing to the Robert Mugabe regime, whose

ZANU-PF it had backed during the liberation war.

In this age of personalist regimes, most African countries had such foreign backing.

Nigeria and South Africa (after the 1960s) were among the rare exceptions, but neither was

characterized by stable personal rule. Another qualification on this general practice is that

stabilized personalist regimes generally like to *appear* completely independent of their foreign

backers. France's clients in Africa regularly and consistently deny their dependence on France.

Similarly, Mobutu, once he regime was securely in power, enacted policies of *authenticité*

(indigenization), of nationalization of foreign (Belgian) enterprises, and of normalization with

the PRC. Yet when the chips were down, and Mobutu needed foreign backing to defeat

Katanga-based rebels in 1977 and 1978, it was again the U.S. that rescued his regime from

oblivion (Young 1978). The Hissene Habré regime of Chad likewise had to depend upon the

external intervention of France in 1980 when Libya attacked the country, and aided rebels.

After the end of the Cold War, only France continued to be willing to serve as an external

guarantor to personalist regimes. As a result, the personalist regimes previously backed by the

U.S. or Russia generally collapsed between 1990 and 1992. Some, like Benin and Congo-

Brazzaville, allowed peaceful transitions to competitive multipartyism ("democracy"), whereas

others were ended by successful insurgencies (e.g., the Doe regime of Liberia and the Mengistu

regime of Ethiopia). The party-dominant regimes of southern Africa all survived, despite the withdrawal of Soviet assistance. Similarly, the few African democracies that have consolidated have *not* become clients of the United States, much as they may receive aid from OECD donors. In recent years, a spate of coups has come to the Sahelian region of Africa, ending long-running democratic experiments in Mali (2012) and then in Niger (2023). An increasing number of these new personalist regimes have sought the backing of the Wagner group and/or Russia more generally (Clark 2023b). Among these are the Abdel al-Burhan regime in Sudan, the military regimes in Mali and Niger, and the Touadera regime in the CAR. The embattled Eritrean regimes of President Isaias Afwerki has recently sought Russian backing, voting along with Russia, Belarus, and Syria against the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russia invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the pattern of personalist regimes seeking external guarantors has definitively returned to continent.

A second general foreign policy pattern of personalist regimes is that they are far less devoted to African continental norms, particularly as embodied in the AU Constitutive Act, than are the other two African regime types (Clark 2023a). Logically, this makes sense because personalist regimes have no commitment to the rule of law at home. Any adherence they show to international law is instrumental, designed to minimize conflicts with neighbors. By contrast, competitive multiparty regimes are committed to constitutional rule as long as their democratic experiments continue. As for party-dominant regimes, these are at least committed to continental norms, if not to the rules-based international order. Many party-dominant regimes abstained on the vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Many are infatuated with the BRICS' hostility to the (mis)perception of a U.S.-dominated international system that needs to be

overturned (Clark 2024b). Clustered in southern Africa, many follow the lead of ANC ruled

South Africa. But among themselves, limited to the African continent, the party-dominant

regimes mainly follow the proscription against unilateral interventions and other continental

norms of inter-state relations.

In a third area, that of participation in continental peace keeping, the foreign policies of

personalist regimes are also subtly different from those of the other regime types (Clark 2023a).

This difference relates to the two other distinctions just discussed above. Democratic and party-

dominant regimes are far more norm-driven in their commitments to continental peace keeping

through the African Union. Although they may enjoy some benefits of participation in AU peace

missions, they can also be surprisingly high-minded. As one example, Tanzania has participated

in AU missions in the Comoros (2008) and the DRC (2013) where it had no obvious or narrow

regime or national interests. But personalist regimes are more selective and instrumental in

their AU and UN peacekeeping commitments. They typically only engage in such mission for one

of two reasons: either to curry favor with an external guarantor, who would like them to do so;

or to undermine a foreign foe or to support a foreign ally. The AU and UN peacekeeping

commitments of Rwanda, for instance, can be understand well in this way (Damman 2024).

Beyond these three areas, all that can be added is that the foreign policies of personalist

regimes are both more erratic, as the whims of the personal ruler dictate, and simply more

personal. That is, the intimate relations of personalist rulers with the leaders of neighboring

countries can be important. The personal animosity or friendship of a personalist leader with

the leader of neighboring state can quite often dictate whether an African state depends its

economic integration commitments or collaborates on common problems, such as cross-border

smuggling and banditry, for example.

Thus, the connection between the personal rule and the foreign policies of personalist

regimes makes good sense. Putnam (1988) suggested many years ago that national leaders

were playing "two-level games" in their foreign policies, and African leaders are no different.

The qualification is that the *nature* of the game varies based on regime type. Personalist rulers

are overwhelmingly concerned about maintaining domestic power when they design and

pursue foreign policies. It is not simply that they do not care about the national interests of

their countries; rather, there are no such thing as a "national interest" for their countries, either

in the realist or the constructivist sense. Not even an inter-subjective understanding of a

"national interest" can exist when (a) the states in question are multi-ethnic, and lacking in any

real sense of national identity, in the sense of "civic nationalism," let alone "ethnic nationalism;"

and (b) the rulers depend upon specific identity groups to maintain power, and display practical

indifference to the creation of a sense of national identity or purpose, either among elites or

among citizens more generally.

A Puzzle: Two Patterns of Inter-state Relations among Personalist Regimes

These generalizations about the linkage between the domestic politics of personalist

regimes and their foreign policies should prove helpful in the abstract. They are particularly

useful in helping to understanding foreign policy differences among regime types, and the inter-

state relations of personal regimes and others. Nonetheless, these generalizations do not

explain all the patterns that may arise among a set of personalist regimes under specific

circumstances. For instance, these general patterns cannot explain how inter-state relations might develop among a group of contiguous personalist regimes. This is important, since groups of contiguous states often form what Buzan and Wæver (2003) call a "regional security complex." African states are perhaps only peripherally involved in the high drama of great power politics that play out in Eurasia and the Middle East. But these dramas do not affect them very much in any case. What *does* matter to their leaders, though, is now they get on with their immediate neighbors. Good or bad relations with a set of neighbors can be crucial to regime security, as Mobutu learned in 1996 and Niger's new military rulers discovered after their coup in 2023.

The significance of this observation becomes more apparent when one considers the sub-regional patterns of amity and enmity that exists across the African continent. These sub-regions enjoy varying levels of inter-state economic and security cooperation; there is also variation in the extent to which states observe the norm against unilateral interventions across international borders. In most regions, unilateral interventions against neighboring states in Africa have long been rare. In recent decades, southern Africa have been dominated by a set of party-dominant states that prefer to act collectively through SADC. South Africa's interventions against Lesotho, Zimbabwe's intervention in Congo, and the South African-Malawi-Tanzania collaboration in the Force Intervention Brigade sent to Congo (2013) have all been approved by SADC. There is only slightly less security cooperation among the states of ECOWAS and of the EAC, at least before the latter began expansion in 2007. One West African exception was Senegal's intervention in Guinea-Bissau in 1998, when the target country experienced a dangerous political crisis. And one East African exception was Kenya's operation *Linda Nchi* in

Somalia in 2011-2012. The latter was a response to al-Shabaab kidnappings in Kenya and (apparently) had the concurrence of the official government of Somali.

Turning to central Africa, one finds that the majority of the continent's personalist regimes are concentrated in this wide region, stretching from the Gulf of Guinea to Lake Victoria in the East. Conventionally, but also usefully it turns out, this wide region is divided into two subregions: "Central Africa," including the four countries that were formerly part of French Equatorial Africa (Cameroon, CAR, Congo, and Gabon), plus Equatorial Guinea, and the former Belgian Congo, now the DRC; and "the Great Lakes," also including the DRC, along with Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda.[3] *All* of the regimes governing these ten states are personalist in nature. They include some of the continent's longest serving rulers, including Biya (since 1982), Museveni (since 1986), Kagame (since 1994), and Sassou II (since 1997).

This division of "greater Central Africa" into two "security complexes" brings us to an interesting puzzle in the relations among contiguous groups of personalist regimes in Africa. Namely, there are completely opposite patterns of intra-regional respect for sovereign rights and territorial integrity. The six states of Central Africa have enjoyed decades of largely harmonious inter-state relations, characterized by mutual tolerance and only low-grade disputes among them. By contrast, the four states of the Great Lakes region have experienced repeated and devastating cross-border military interventions beginning in 1990, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPF) crossed Uganda's border to launch a civil war in Rwanda. Beginning in 1996, the other three states of the sub-region, led by Rwanda, all intervened in the DRC, the "Great African War," which only reached a coda in 2003. Since then, regional interventions by state and non-state groups across the DRC-Rwanda and DRC-Uganda border occurred non-stop,

if intermittently. Moreover, severe tensions between the Museveni and Kagame regimes have nearly led Uganda and Rwanda to blows on multiple occasions. And Kagame has arrogantly threatened the leaders of all the countries that border Rwanda at one time or another, including Museveni, his erstwhile political and military mentor. This complete divergence in the nature of the two "regional security complexes," both populated entirely by personalist regimes, raises the question of how to account for the difference.

Three major elements within the respective security complexes would seem to account for most of the difference in the level of respective for continental norms with each. All three were discussed above as part of the description of how personalist regimes function. These elements relate to differences in the nature of the external guarantors, differences in the ethnic geography within the regions, and the different personal relationships among rulers that have evolved over time.

Compared to the Great Lakes regimes, all the regimes of Central Africa regimes been backed by France, at least since the advent of the Sassou II regime in 1997. (Relations between Congo and France were fraught during the short presidency of Pascal Lissouba, 1992-1997.) France has maintained a military base in Gabon since the country's independence in 1960 and it strongly backed both the Omar Bongo and Ali Bongo regimes from 1967 to 2023. France has likewise been a bulwark of the France helped restore Sassou to power during the 1997 civil war in that country (Clark 2008, chapter 8). The CAR hosted a French military base until 1997, but maintained a military presence in the country until 2023, when the Touadéra regime expelled the French in favor of the Wagner Group. As for Equatorial Guinea, the only one of the group not a former French colony, it is useful to note that Teodoro Obiang Nguema adopted the CFA

Franc as the country's official currency, and that he stashes millions in "ill-gotten gains" in France. Having France as an external guarantor of these regimes has been an enormous source of grievance to the populations of these countries, but it has probably served the cause of intraregional peace: France has an interest in peace among the countries of the sub-region.

By contrast, the situation with respect to external support in the Great Lakes region has been hugely tumultuous. As documented by Schraeder (2000) among others, a surprising rivalry between France and the United States arose in the mid-1990s and only subsided many years later. As noted above, France took over from the U.S. as the main external backer of Mobutu at the end of the Cold War, whereas the U.S. developed increasingly close relations with the Museveni regime in Uganda throughout the 1990s. France also backed the Habyarimana regime in Rwanda up until the day of the former dictator's death at the start of the genocide in 1994. Before seizing power in Kigali in 1994, Paul Kagame, on the other hand, had received military training in the U.S., and was a protégé of Museveni. Upon taking power, Kagame soon cut most times to France and, shockingly for France, made English the country's official language. As for the Joseph Kabila regime in the DRC (2001-2019), it enjoyed cautious and then more fulsome backing from the U.S., especially during and following the peaceful elections of 2006. But the U.S. became increasingly cool on the Kabila regime as it became more autocratic, and especially after Kabila failed to organize scheduled elections in 2016.   During the same years, France was growing closer to Kabila. The lack of coordination, and sometimes rivalry, between France and the U.S. was a major "permissive condition," if not a direct cause, of the perpetual Rwandan and Ugandan interventions in the DRC.

Second, the ethno-political geography of Central Africa is far more favorable to peace than that of the Great Lakes region. First, the population density of the Central African states is far lower than it is in Burundi, Rwanda, and Eastern Congo, among the most densely populated place in Africa. Just to illustrate, the most densely populated countries of Central Africa are Equatorial Guinea (61 persons/square km) and Cameroon (59 per square km). (Gabon hosts 9 per square km.) By contrast, the population density of Rwanda is almost 10 times greater at 523 persons/square km. Across the border in the North Kivu region, population density is over 100 persons/square km. Burundi and Uganda are also densely populated.

More relevant, though, is that none of the personalist rulers of Central Africa have an ethno-regional base that puts him at odds with the neighbors. Biya has an ethnic base among the Beti people of southern Cameroon; the Bongos had a regional base of support in the sparsely populated Haut-Ogooué region of southern Gabon; Sassou depends upon Mbochi cadres from the under-populated north of Congo-Brazzaville; and Joseph Kabila was of mixed ethnicity and was born in South Kivu, far away from the ethnic politics of Central Africa. The lack of overlapping or conflicting ethnic-regional bases of political support for the personalist rulers of Central Africa has provided them with no reason to fear one another.

By contrast, the transitional ethno-regional politics of the Great Lakes region is fearsome. Kagame is of course a Tutsi, who grew up in exile in Uganda. Museveni is from a parallel caste (the Bahima) of a parallel ethnic group in Uganda (the Banyankole), creating ethnic fealty between them. The great problem for the Great Lakes region, however, is the large Banyarwanda (i.e., both Hutu and Tutsi) populations in the eastern Congolese regions of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. For Kagame in particular, the Tutsi populations in eastern Congo

("Banyamulenge") require protection, whereas the Hutu populations, reinforced by the exodus for many Hutu from Rwanda itself, pose an existential threat. These real and imagined threats from these groups have provided the impetus for Kagame to intervene in the DRC now for nearly 30 years. Likewise, at times when Burundi has been ruled by a Hutu leader, tensions between Burundi and Rwanda have sometimes arisen. Notably, Kagame was often critical of Burundian president Pierre Nkurunziza, whose father was Hutu (Al-Jazeera 2015).[4]

Finally, the *personal* connections and animosities of personalist rulers condition the international relations of the states they rule. Considering the Central Africa sub-region, long-time dictators like Biya, Bongo, and Sassou often seemed like members of an extended family. In fact, Omar Bongo was married to Edith Lucie Sassou Nguesso, the daughter of Congolese president Sassou, in 1990. It is therefore not surprising, inter alia., that Bongo was of assistance to Sassou when the latter shot his way back into power in 1997. Aside from their shared Francophilia, these leaders move in the same social and diplomatic circles. Notably, all of them have been active members of the same masonic lodge, the National Grand Lodge of France (Dassié 2009). Although their stints in power were shorter, former CAR presidents André Kolingba (1981-1993) and Ange-Félix Patassé (1993-2003) both had friendly personal relations with the other personalist rulers of Central Africa.

By contrast, in the Great Lakes region, the personal relations between and among Kagame, Museveni, and Laurent Kabila have been a source of conflict between the DRC and Rwanda, and Rwanda and Uganda, in particular. The source of hostility has often been the refusal of junior "mentees" to accept the guidance—sometimes instructions—of the erstwhile mentors. As Reyntens (2009: 106-107) has amply documented, Kabila's AFDL rebel alliance was

entirely a creation of Museveni and (to a lesser extent) Kagame. The AFDL would never have

advanced far, let alone overthrow the Mobutu regime, without the robust backing of these two

regional leaders. Once he was securely in power, however, Kabila increasingly resented the

presence of Rwandan and Banyamulenge troops essentially controlling his regime in Kinshasa.

Accordingly, he ordered the Rwandan troops out of the country in August 1998, starting the

"Great Africa War," or the second Congo war. Kabila's personal resentment toward his erstwhile

mentors and their refusal to allow him to freely rule his own country were thus a major element

in Africa's bloodiest, longest enduring inter-state conflict. Somewhat similar dynamics apply to

the relationship of Museveni and Kagame. The latter cut his teeth as a military officer fighting

under Museveni's command in the National Liberation Army that conquered Uganda in January

1986. Kagame's RPA received substantial support from Museveni it invaded Rwanda from

Ugandan territory in 1990. In this era, following the death in battle of Fred Rwigema, the

original RPA commander, in October 1990, Kagame took over the organization as Museveni's

protégé. After consolidating his power, however, Kagame naturally sought autonomy from

Museveni and the right to act in his personal interest. These personal tensions partly account

for the battles between the armies of these two erstwhile allies that was fought in Kisangani in

the DRC in 1999 and again in 2000 (Reyntjens 2009: 205-206). And for Kagame's subsequent

threats against Museveni and tensions between the two states.

Conclusion

Among mafia organizations controlling contiguous neighborhoods in a city, there can be either a

criminal peace or open violence between them. Mafia dons are often happy to exploit the

vulnerable populations of their territories (while also providing "protection"), accumulate wealth, enjoy their status, and celebrate family achievements. Africa's personalist dictators are not very different, even if they must also play the role of head of state. When members of a mafia family commit violence against another mafia family, however, "wars" between competing mafias sometime erupt. The tit-for-tat killings can continue for decades, and only the replacement of the mafia boss ("godfather") can sometimes lead to peace. The violence of the Great Lakes region is much like a feud among competing bosses of various ethnic mafia families. No outsiders are willing or able to control this violence. And the basis of the successive conflicts has been both ethnic and personal. As with mafia organizations, inter-state relations among Africa's personalist regimes can be either peaceful or deadly, depending upon these factors. Neither party interests, nor "national interests," on the other hand, have much to do with the situations of amity or enmity that may prevail.

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[1] The suggestion that South Africa is a one-party dominant state, and not a democracy, will shock many Western liberals, particularly those infatuated with disciplinary Political Science's institutionalist dogma. Indeed, South Africa does have democratic, multiparty institutions, just like Botswana next door. But in terms of *political culture*, South Africa is not a democracy. The African National Conference has had a political "lock" on the loyalty of most Black South Africans, and it will for the foreseeable future. As a result, South Africa is not likely to meet Huntington's "two turnover" test of democratic consolidation for some time to come. So far, independent South Africa has had five presidents, all from the ruling ANC. Two of these, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, were effectively deposed by the ANC leadership.

[2] I take this term from Decalo (1997), who uses it to describe the Omar Bongo regime in Gabon. In this case, the external guarantor tour for this (civilian) regime was France.

[3] Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan is also arguably part of this "regional security complex."

[4] Nkurunziza's mother was apparently Tutsi, but ethnic identity in Burundi is governed chiefly by one's paternity.