

The Right to Rule, Power and Reward: Liberation Movements and the Currency of Political Entitlement on the African Continent

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Abstract: With the attainment of independence across Africa, liberation movements transformed into ruling regimes. They employed various strategies, including the utilisation of liberation heritage to maintain a grip on political power. Victory against colonial rule became a justification for former liberation movements to hold on to power. Using case studies from across Africa, we argue that there is a politics of entitlement among former liberation movements, whereby liberation credentials are mobilised to legitimise political hegemony. We used a neo-patrimonialism framework to explain how liberation movements in Africa leverage historical legitimacy to build personal political capital, promote patronage systems, and justify their entitlement to state resources. Observation and media analysis, blended with an examination of secondary written texts, were used to gather data that addressed questions on how historical legitimacy is employed to entrench neo-patrimonialism. We discovered that despite the uniqueness of individual countries' geopolitics, the behaviour of liberation movements exhibits striking similarities across Africa, entrenched in the belief that dislodging colonialism justifies perpetual political legitimacy. While there is extensive literature on postcolonial African politics, this

study is unique as it contributes to the historiography of African liberation politics by analysing the methods used by former liberation movements in utilising liberation heritage as political capital.

Keywords: Historical legitimacy, liberation movements, colonialism, African politics, neo-patrimonialism.

1. Introduction

By 1994, almost all African countries, except the Sahrawi Democratic Republic, had gained independence from colonial rule. This liberation of African countries from colonial bondage was marked by jubilation among the once oppressed black majority. Liberation movements such as the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the Kenya African National Union (KANU), the Convention People's Party (CPP) of Ghana, Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) (MPLA), the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria, and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) of Uganda became ruling parties in their respective countries. These former liberation movements gained political authority through the goodwill of being authentic representatives of the African majority, guaranteeing an end to colonial oppression and ushering in a new era of freedom, equality, and self-determination. This legacy of liberation has largely been institutionalised in patriotic narratives and national memory and has effectively contributed to the construction and sustenance of political legitimacy.

Unfortunately, as Mamdani (2018) observed, this legacy has continued to fade through decades that witnessed a reinvention of colonial oppression and authority. The euphoria of nationalism has pushed the former liberation movements into unethical strategies to maintain their grip on political

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power. For instance, former liberation movements such as the NRM of Uganda and ZANU PF of Zimbabwe have been accused of rigging elections and using violence to silence dissenting voices (Vokes and Wilkins, 2016; Mazango, 2005). Members of these political parties believe that their role in liberating Africans from colonial bondage justifies their political authority. However, that belief has gradually lost its audience, particularly within the 'born free' generation in post-colonial Africa. Consequently, in what Benyera (2025) refers to as the curse of liberation movements, several former liberation movements, including the MCP of Malawi, the ANC of South Africa, and CCM of Tanzania, have either lost power, are gradually losing support, or continue to use violence to impose themselves on the people (Boakye, 2021; Mngomezulu, 2025). This trend has raised growing interest in academia as scholars analyse the political evolution of the former liberation movements in Africa.

Using a neo-patrimonialism framework, this study has joined the growing scholarship that examines the nature and evolution of African politics. Through an analysis of secondary written texts, the paper scrutinises the notion of political legitimacy as a form of reward for leading liberation struggles in African states. This scrutiny involves analysing the evolution of liberation movements and their problematic use of liberation struggle heroism as a long-term claim to power. The issue of concern is that such claims are continuously reinforced through state narratives, commemorative practices, and ideological representations of the past, which provoke stiff resistance from opposing forces, resulting in instability in African states. While existing scholarship, including Mngomezulu (2025), Sithole (2022), Vaudran (2017), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009), has analysed the evolution of postcolonial African politics, there is still a gap concerning the link between liberation heritage and the various strategies used by former liberation movements to maintain their grip on power.

This paper addresses that gap by answering questions on how African liberation heritage has been used and abused for political expediency and personal glory. This helps explain the contestations that emerge when liberation-based legitimacy is confronted by modern demands for accountability, constitutionalism, and inclusive governance. Focusing on liberation heritage as a political resource, the analysis reflects on whether liberation history continues to serve as a unifying source of legitimacy or whether it has become an exclusionary tool for entrenching ruling elites. Hence, the novelty of this study lies in the examination of the various strategies used by former liberation movements in utilising liberation struggle credentials as political capital in a post-colonial context.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which, according to Steward and Haynes (2019), allows historians to be critical researchers who question why, how, and for whom. In the same manner, this study examines how former liberation movements in Africa use liberation heritage as political capital. Observation and analysis of written sources were the major research tools used for data gathering. We considered that, as citizens of African states ruled by former liberation movements (South Africa and Zimbabwe), we, by default, became participant observers. According to Uldam and McCurdy (2013), participant observation enables researchers to immerse themselves in the research site and gain in-depth knowledge of an environment and its practices. Therefore, as citizens, we observed and experienced the political atmosphere in African states governed by former liberation movements. However, Stokes and Cotton (2010) caution that a significant difficulty with observational research is the tendency to collect a great deal of rather unstructured data, which can present practical challenges. In this case, we acknowledge that our observations and experiences were largely limited to South Africa and Zimbabwe, although we also travelled and stayed in other African countries. Additionally, since we were not part of the ruling elite, our experiences were limited to general observation. To counter such limitations, we analysed written texts, including political party manifestos, media reports, and published journal articles.

Brundage and Little (2017) concur that although written sources in their various forms can be time-consuming and subject to varying interpretations, they are significant because they offer durable,

verifiable, and interpretable evidence that helps complement other historical sources. In this study, secondary written texts were used first as historical sources and secondly to verify and interpret data from observations. The written texts consulted ranged from political party manifestos to government reports. In line with Burrows (2023) advocacy for the significance of digital humanities in contemporary high-profile historical research, researchers utilised various online sources such as political correspondences and social media posts. To obtain expert interpretation and provide better context and background, secondary texts such as books and journal articles on post-colonial African politics were also examined. These texts, in addition to complementing the general observations of the researchers, were significant in providing verifiable data and timelines, which, according to Burrows (2023), are essential in critical historical analysis. This methodology enabled us to answer research questions regarding how former liberation movements use liberation heritage as political capital. The methodology was guided and informed by a neo-patrimonialism theoretical framework.

3. Presentation of Major Arguments

3.1 The relevance of the neo-patrimonialism framework

This study employs a neo-patrimonialism theoretical framework to analyse the use of liberation heritage as political capital by liberation movements in post-colonial Africa. This framework offers a lens through which to examine the evolution of African politics, characterised by the coexistence of formal bureaucratic structures with informal, personalistic, and patron-client networks. Generally, patrimonialism is a form of political organisation in which authority is based primarily on personal power exercised by a ruler, either directly or indirectly (Bakker, 2017). Max Weber describes 'patrimonialism' as a traditional form of government (Cheeseman, Bertrand, and Husaini 2019). Therefore, neo-patrimonialism represents a new form of patrimonialism in post-colonial Africa, signifying a post-colonial African form of governance influenced by colonialism. Soest (2010) and Bayart (1993) concur that in neo-patrimonialism, formal state institutions are fused with the informal, particularistic politics of rulers. In this way, neo-patrimonialism reflects aspects of the post-colony, which, according to Mbembe (2001), emphasise the effects of colonialism on both the colonisers and the colonised.

Neo-patrimonialism theory became dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, as it was widely used to describe the African political atmosphere after colonial rule. The major characteristic of neo-patrimonialism is the blurred distinction between public and private spheres of power. This allows political authority to be exercised through personal loyalty, patronage, kinship, and historical allegiance rather than through impersonal, rule-bound institutions. Within the context of post-colonial African states, neo-patrimonialism explains a system of governance that blends pre-colonial traditional African kingdoms with a European type of governance, resulting in a prototype government that falls short of both democratic principles and autocratic kingship characteristics. Therefore, we use neo-patrimonialism to explain how the legacy of the liberation struggle is utilised as a resource by ruling elites in Africa. These ruling regimes claim to respect democratic principles while engaging in autocratic governance, much like traditional African kings who would crush any threats to their thrones or the way colonialists thwarted advocacy for majority rule. Triumphs in liberation struggles are often used to legitimise the political parties' perpetual grip on power, with liberation movements that transitioned into ruling parties after colonial rule using political power as a reward for liberating people from colonialism. The result is the personalisation of political authority and the patronage of state resources, leading to the growth of a system characterised by political entitlement. In such a system, the ruling elites invoke the memory of colonial resistance to justify their continued dominance and delegitimise opposition as unpatriotic or counter-revolutionary. The state, therefore, becomes both a political and symbolic arena in which liberation heritage is instrumentalised to consolidate personal and party power. By adopting the neo-patrimonial framework, this study interrogates the mechanisms through which historical legitimacy is converted

into political entitlement and how these processes shape the governance culture of post-liberation African states.

3.2 Neo-patrimonialism and post-colonial African politics: A review

Extensive research has been conducted on neo-patrimonialism and post-colonial African politics. For instance, Alou (2012) researched neo-patrimonialism in Niger, Moti (2019) used case studies from West and Southern Africa, Sithole (2022) focused on South Africa and Zimbabwe, and Kasera and Juma (2025) examined Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In addition to scholars such as Zubairi Wai (2012), who dismiss Western benchmarks of good governance and appreciate the Africanness of neo-patrimonialism, there is a general consensus among scholars that neo-patrimonialism is a cancer that has undermined hopes for good governance in post-colonial Africa. Araoye (2018) concurs with Beekers and van Gool (2012) that, due to practices of political clientelism or patronage, post-colonial regimes in Africa fail to eradicate authoritarianism, nepotism, and corruption, even as good governance goals have dominated public policy. This aligns with Mamdani's (2018) observations on the fading of nationalist promises and the reinvention of dictatorship in post-colonial Africa. Such a situation reveals the normalisation of unethical practices within governance systems. Ukertor Gabriel Moti (2019) also explains the effects of neo-patrimonialism on good governance in African states. Using case studies from West and Southern Africa, Moti argues that, due to neo-patrimonialism, successive post-colonial governments in these sub-regions have failed to utilise their vast natural resources for good governance and development.

Many governments have over-exploited these resources, consolidating a neo-patrimonial fusion of economic and political elites. Similarly, Sithole (2022) argues that neo-patrimonialism has had dire consequences for natural resource governance practices in post-colonial South Africa and Zimbabwe. Sithole (2022) found that, due to neo-patrimonialism, African countries with extensive natural resources continue to experience widespread poverty, conflict, and stunted economic growth. This is because resource redistribution favours party loyalists, which undermines transparency and accountability. We draw profound strength from the rigorous analysis of neo-patrimonialism, which illuminates the intricate ways in which personal rule, patronage networks, and informal power structures have reshaped the political landscape of post-colonial Africa. By unpacking these dynamics, we offer a sharper lens through which to understand the persistent challenges to democratic consolidation and institutional integrity across the continent. However, unlike Beekers and Van Gool (2012), Moti (2019), and Sithole (2022), who focus on the effects of neo-patrimonialism on governance and resource distribution, our focus is on analysing how post-colonial regimes utilise liberation heritage to enhance neo-patrimonialism. This study distinguishes itself by concentrating on the mechanisms through which neo-patrimonial structures are sustained within post-colonial African political systems. Furthermore, we specifically focus on governments led by former liberation movements, which makes our study unique.

A substantial body of scholarship, including the works of Ranger (2004), Tendi (2010), Dorman and Salih (2006), and Alexander and McGregor (2013), has examined the politics of patronage as practised by ruling regimes that originated as African liberation movements. These studies illuminate how such regimes have often institutionalised clientelist networks and personalised governance structures, leveraging their liberation credentials to consolidate power and distribute state resources through informal, loyalty-based mechanisms. Dorman and Salih (2006), for instance, examined the political legacy of the liberation struggle on post-liberation politics in Africa. Through the lens of polyarchy, Salih (2006) explains that, after overthrowing colonial regimes, some liberation movement governments failed to implement the democratic values that initially inspired their struggle. As the former liberation movements transformed into ruling parties, they began to engage in politics of patronage, corruption, and authoritarianism, which mimic the very colonial structures they previously fought against. Such situations gave rise to “movement governments” caught between

internal and external pressures to democratise and the movements' desire to maintain a grip on power at any cost. Similarly, Dorman (2006) offers an analysis of the impact of reforms introduced by post-liberation regimes and their relations with traditional authorities and civil society. These publications provide insights into how former liberation movements govern in different African countries. By analysing the transition of liberation movements to ruling parties, these works expose the double standards of political parties that engage in patronage politics while having promised democracy and the rule of law during the fight against colonial rule.

Building on the foundational insights of Dorman and Salih (2006), Alexander and McGregor (2013) provide a compelling and nuanced analysis of Zimbabwe's political evolution, demonstrating how ZANU-PF has strategically transformed over time since the 1980s. Their work reveals how ZANU-PF has adapted its political strategies, narratives, and structures to maintain dominance, often by recalibrating its liberation legacy to suit shifting socio-political contexts and challenges. This evolution underscores the party's resilience and its capacity to reconfigure power in ways that blur the boundaries between state, party, and society. Alexander and McGregor (2013) note that ZANU-PF in the 1980s had offered hope for good governance, but with the turn of the millennium, it proved no different from other former liberation movements in Western and Central Africa, where the politics of patronage, corruption, and violence against the opposition became defining characteristics. This point is similarly emphasised by Ranger (2004) and Tendi (2010), who explain the abuse of patriotic history by ZANU-PF to justify their continued grip on power. An in-depth analysis of such works adds value to this study regarding the evolution of post-colonial African politics within the context of liberation movements that have become ruling governments. However, unlike Ranger, Tendi, Alexander, and McGregor, this paper explains the use of liberation heritage by former liberation movements as they transition from democracy to neo-patrimonialism. In this way, this study discusses liberation heritage as a method employed by former liberation movements across Africa to justify their ongoing hold on power.

3.3 Liberation heritage and the claim to legitimacy

Various strategies, including the manipulation of state institutions, rigging elections, and electoral violence, are commonly used by post-colonial regimes in Africa to maintain their grip on power (Morse, 2018). Among these strategies, the use of liberation heritage has proven to be an effective long-term approach. The efficacy of this strategy hinges on the goodwill extended by the African majority to liberation movements for their pivotal role in dismantling colonial rule and securing national independence. As noted by Vaudran (2017), former liberation movements were hailed as 'messiahs' after liberating their respective countries from colonial rule from the 1960s through to the 1990s. This acclaim provided the movements with justification to lead, resulting in the closure of political space for opposition politics. Former liberation movements such as ZANU-PF, KANU, TANU, UNIP, and MCP assumed power following the demise of colonial rule and exploited their revolutionary legacy to claim an 'unfinished revolution'. Mngomezulu (2025) observed that the ANC in South Africa invoked Mandela's name in election campaigns, thereby using liberation heritage for political gain. In the 2014 elections, for example, Mandela's legacy was invoked as a strategy to remind voters that the ANC was Mandela's party. This was clearly emphasised in the ANC Manifesto with the words, 'We dedicate this Manifesto to Tata Mandela' (ANC, 2014). By listening to the post-1994 ANC campaign messages and analysing their campaign flyers and billboards, we were convinced that the ANC thrives on anti-apartheid messages that remind people to value the party's sacrifices in bringing equality, peace, and freedom to the South African majority.

The same claim to liberation heritage is common in ZANU-PF, where the electorate is constantly reminded of the sacrifices of the liberation struggle as reasons to vote for the party (Masiya & Maringira, 2017). Observations of ZANU-PF campaign strategies in the Zimbabwe 2018 and 2023 elections revealed that the party used billboards featuring pictures of liberation war heroes to remind

people that the elections were linked to the liberation struggle. For instance, at business centres, including Chachacha growth point in Shurugwi District of Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF erected billboards with the faces of liberation heroes such as Leopold Takawira, accompanied by campaign messages reminding voters that voting for ZANU-PF in the elections was a way of thanking the liberation war heroes. This demonstrates the use of the liberation war as political capital to justify the party's perpetual clinging to political power. The use of liberation heritage has been entrenched in post-colonial politics through various strategies, including redefining state narratives, using liberation commemorative practices, and ideological representations of the past across various platforms.

While liberation heritage has served as a powerful source of post-independence legitimacy for many African ruling parties, we contend in this study that its continued invocation as a political shield has become increasingly untenable. The claim to legitimacy rooted in the liberation struggle of the ruling parties, though once unifying, now risks entrenching authoritarianism, stifling democratic renewal, and alienating younger generations who demand accountability over nostalgia. As the continent grapples with the demands of modern governance, we argue that it is imperative for liberation movements to evolve beyond the politics of memory and embrace inclusive, transparent, and performance-based legitimacy. Without this shift, the very heritage that once symbolised freedom may become a barrier to the democratic aspirations it originally sought to fulfil.

3.3.1 Use of state narratives

African post-colonial states led by former liberation movements have long utilised state narratives to invoke and amplify the significance of liberation heritage, thereby justifying their grip on power. These state narratives, defined as the overarching stories, themes, and ideas a state uses to shape its identity, history, and place in the world, can effectively influence people's perspectives and entrench neo-patrimonialism. Roberts (2000) argues that the state has the power to generate and suppress historical narratives due to its capacity to shape them through instruments such as the media and education curricula. Typically, these narratives are shaped through the hero worship of political leaders, transforming their personal aspirations into national policies. Consequently, although the narratives may differ among individual states, they generally exhibit neo-patrimonial elements, as seen in the development of personalised philosophies such as *Mugabeism* in Zimbabwe, *Kaundaism* in Zambia, and *Nyerereism* in Tanzania. This supports Falola's (2022) observation that narratives are significant in moulding identity, affinity, and solidarity.

In postcolonial Africa, state narratives serve as instruments for entrenching neo-patrimonialism. While we agree with Ndlovu (2016), Mapfumo (2025), and Mazango (2025) that citizens would resist these state narratives by seeking alternative sources of information, such as social media and independent media outlets, we found that state narratives have been an effective strategy for utilising liberation heritage for political gain. These narratives, which often manifest as regime policies and propaganda, legitimise elite domination and obscure personalised rule under the guise of national unity and liberation credentials. For instance, an emphasis on national unity, liberation credentials, and the invocation of independence and state sovereignty have been common strategies for silencing dissenting voices in post-colonial African states.

In Angola, for example, the MPLA has, over the years, taken full control of state media, channelling propaganda narratives aimed at promoting the party's political standing (Mapfumo, 2025). The MPLA has silenced broadcasters with dissenting voices. In July 2008, *Rádio Despertar*, the voice of the main opposition party, the *União para a Independência Total de Angola*, was issued a six-month ban in what independent voices and opposition activists described as political suppression of the media by the state (Africa Confidential, 2008). The Social Communication Legislative Package, enacted in Angola in 2017 by the MPLA government, exacerbated the situation by further tightening media freedom and free speech in the country (Human Rights Watch 2016).

The state media in Angola and Zimbabwe, for instance, is used as the ruling party's propaganda mouthpiece, portraying the liberation struggles as sacred foundations of the nation. Watching news on the Zimbabwean Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and reading the state-controlled *Herald* and *Chronicle* newspapers leaves us with a strong impression that these media platforms have been transformed into ruling party propaganda outlets, where liberation heritage is personalised as ZANU PF property. For example, during the 2002, 2005, and 2008 election periods, the second author observed that ZBC radio played jingles (political songs) every fifteen minutes featuring liberation war messages that encouraged people to jealously guard the gains of the war fought by ZANU (now ZANU-PF). In one of the jingles entitled '*Rumbai Makashinga*', citizens were urged to ignore the temporary suffering caused by economic sanctions and focus on the gains of the liberation war.

Even though citizens resisted this propaganda by seeking alternative sources of information, it illustrates the use of state media for political expediency. This observation is supported by statistics from media monitoring agencies such as the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), which reported that in the 2022 bi-elections and in the lead-up to the 2023 harmonised elections, ZANU PF garnered over ninety percent (90%) of ZBC airtime (BAZ 2022). Ndlovu (2016) concurs with Mazango's (2005) observation that the manipulation of public media to shape state narratives has been a strategy employed by regimes in both colonial and post-colonial Africa, with Zimbabwe intensifying this practice at the turn of the millennium.

We, however, need to point out that the use of state media for propaganda purposes is not uniform in all African nations ruled by former liberation movements. Some countries, such as Namibia and South Africa, still maintain a degree of media independence (UNESCO, 2024). Of analytical significance to this inquiry is the observation that media-driven propaganda is substantively infused with narratives of liberation heroism. Such discursive constructions serve to valorise political actors as emblematic protagonists of anti-colonial resistance, thereby legitimising their contemporary claims to authority through the symbolic capital of sacrifice and struggle. This discursive strategy exemplifies the instrumentalisation of liberation heritage as a mechanism for the normative rationalisation and perpetuation of patrimonial political structures within the African postcolonial context.

Selective memory of the liberation struggle is also largely used in shaping state narratives. Ranger (2004) argues that these former liberation movements use selective memory and patriotic history to silence opposing voices, who in most cases are portrayed as weapons of betrayal or sellouts used by Western powers. De Souto (2013) argues that in Mozambique, after independence, Frelimo's history was deliberately mainstreamed. That history was transmitted through the documentation published by the FRELIMO Secretariat for Ideological Work and through testimonies provided by protagonists in the liberation struggle. During the period of single-party rule in Mozambique from 1975 to 1990, this historical narrative became the official national history of the Frelimo government. This illustrates a deliberate stance by a former liberation movement to shape a state narrative that gives the ruling party the political advantage of using liberation heritage. Even though with different intensities, the same was witnessed in other former liberation movements, such as the ANC of South Africa and the CCM of Tanzania. According to Soudien (2009), this process of selective memory resulted in the promotion of what he terms 'triumphalist memory' within the ANC. Boakye (2021) observes that such selective memory is at times not sustainable, as some former liberation movements, such as CCM and CPP, ended up struggling to survive after their founders exited the political arena. While such observations are valid, the bottom line is that former liberation movements use selective memory of the liberation struggle to shape state narratives for political mileage.

3.3.2 The education curricula in ideological representations of the past

Closely linked to the use of state narratives is the indoctrination of the education curricula and the mainstreaming of liberation history. This is a long-term 'catch them young' strategy that aims to cultivate 'patriotic' empathy for liberation sacrifices among the post-colonial generation that has no direct experience of the liberation struggle. At the turn of the millennium, the ZANU-PF-led government in Zimbabwe made inroads by enforcing the teaching of Zimbabwean patriotic history in schools and tertiary institutions. Moyo (2014) concurs with Barnes (2007) that the secondary school curricula in Zimbabwe, particularly the history syllabus, were politically instrumentalised to serve the envisaged nation-state project of enabling the ZANU-PF regime's stay in power. An analysis of the secondary school 2166 and 2167 Ordinary Level history syllabus in Zimbabwe since the year 2000 revealed a deliberate bias towards hero worship of the liberation icons, with topics that expose the regime, such as the 1980s Gukurahundi Massacres, being silenced (Ministry of Education and Culture 1996, Ministry of Education and Culture 2002). As a high school history teacher in Zimbabwe between 2009 and 2019, the second author observed that history as an academic subject was viewed as a ZANU-PF campaign instrument because the topics and teaching methodology were designed to align with ZANU-PF political ideology. For instance, patriotism was emphasised in the Ordinary Level 2167 history syllabus teaching objectives and methodologies (Ministry of Education and Culture 2002). The syllabus was crafted to praise the African nationalist, as demonstrated by the Afrocentric bias, particularly in the narratives of the liberation struggle.

In addition, the National Strategic Studies (NASS) syllabus in Zimbabwean tertiary education is another case that illustrates the use of the education curriculum to drive the regime's agendas. The syllabus, through topics on Zimbabwe's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial history, states the need to mould patriotic graduates as one of its aims (NASS 2025). At face value, the NASS syllabus aims at moulding responsible and patriotic citizens. However, as Ranger (2004) and Tendi (2010) observed, patriotism in Zimbabwe was defined along ZANU-PF lines. This contaminates any educational curriculum that mentions patriotism in Zimbabwe. Similarly, the case of the socialist-powered Nyerere's Ujamaa education and the Ghanaian education system under Kwame Nkrumah can be said to have served as vehicles to promote Pan-Africanism, which is linked to the ideology of former liberation movements (Mayo, 2012; Adeze'Frehiwot, 2011). This, therefore, reveals efforts towards an education system that creates worshippers of the liberation struggle among school graduates. Just like Zimbabwe, the history education curriculum in South Africa is littered with sensitive and controversial topics such as the land question, nationalism, and colonisation (Chimbunde & Brown, 2025). These topics, while justified as means of bringing to light the historical injustices of the nation and instilling patriotism and nationhood, serve the ideological goals of the former liberation movements, such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Using such a strategy, the ruling elite infuses narratives that glorify themselves as custodians of peace and progress, while depoliticising citizens through appeals to loyalty, gratitude, and continuity.

3.3.4 Patronage and welfare policies

In their quest to entrench neo-patrimonial politics, former liberation movements in post-colonial Africa utilise patronage networks that distribute material benefits in exchange for political allegiance. This process blurs the boundaries between public resources and private power, leading to rampant corruption. While patronage is common even among non-liberation movements, the use of patronage politics by former liberation movements is unique in that these parties attempt to justify it as a reward for the sacrifices made during the liberation struggle. Land, money, and access to national resources such as mineral wealth are among the common tools used by regimes in Africa to buy allegiance. Dorman (2006) argues that these former liberation movements have become exclusivist or predatory due to the patronage system that rewards their followers while punishing opponents. Bauer (2001) observed that while Namibia, under the South West Africa People's

Organisation (SWAPO), has exhibited democratic characteristics, it also displays neo-patrimonial traits, as evidenced by patronage tendencies and the concentration of power in the executive.

According to Vokes and Wilkins (2016), Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda uses its dominant party network to effectively practice patronage politics, where loyalists are given jobs and other resources while the opposition is suppressed by security services. Lowi (2007) noted similar patronage politics in Algeria, where the dominant FLN party uses oil rents for political clientelism. Similarly, Beresford (2015) laments that the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa has fostered gatekeeper politics that have led to the growth of patronage networks. This means that political leaders occupying positions of authority in the party or public service regulate access to the resources and opportunities they control. This situation was evident during the reign of Jacob Zuma (2009–2018), where accusations of state capture by the Gupta family exacerbated patronage factionalism within the party. This neo-patrimonial politics reached a peak with the scramble by factions to control state and non-state institutions. For instance, in 2016, opposing factions in the ANC backed Des van Rooyen against Pravin Gordhan in the contest for the finance minister post (Friedman, 2016). Though aimed at extending the political lifespan of individual politicians and the party, such patronage systems at times create volatile intra-party conflicts and bitter factional struggles as rival elites compete for power. However, it cannot be overstated that such strategies sustain neo-patrimonial governance through incentivised public voter consent, which has been manufactured by justifying patronage and corruption through ideological myths of the liberation struggle. A general observation by the first author during the arrest of Jacob Zuma in 2021 revealed the existence of neo-patrimonial politics, as personal loyalty, ethnic mobilisation, and patronage networks were activated with the conviction that Zuma, as a liberation hero, deserved immunity from prosecution.

3.3.4 Commemorative practices

Commemorative practices are a common strategy utilised by former liberation movements in Africa to instil neo-patrimonial politics. These practices, which include commemorations of Heroes' Days, independence anniversaries, and war memorials, create politicised spaces that provide the former liberation movements with platforms to gain loyalty by portraying themselves as custodians of liberation history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems, 2009). Such loyalty is then used to justify the parties' patronage and their perpetual hold on political power. Becker and Lentz (2013), in their study of independence celebrations and other national days in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, discovered that there is political power play and contestation of the politics of memory involved in the creation of each country's festive calendar, with post-colonial ruling regimes exercising control over national days. In what they call 'cultural' nationalism, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009) explain that in Zimbabwe, the ruling ZANU-PF party used national cultural activities, such as heroes' celebrations and music galas, to legitimise its continued rule in the face of the increasingly popular Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the growing number of civil society organisations. Observations of the proceedings at national celebrations, particularly Independence, Heroes, and Defence Forces Days in Zimbabwe, reflect the dominance of ZANU-PF. For example, between 2009 and 2023, the second author attended several independence celebrations in Zimbabwe at the district, provincial, and national levels. The observations indicated that, at these events, party regalia was worn, slogans were chanted, and new meanings were attributed to the events. The aim was to remind the audience that the party was responsible for bringing independence. This directly undermined opposing political movements, portraying them as agents of neo-colonialism.

In Uganda, Lubogo (2025) observed that some sectors have questioned the inclusiveness, fairness, and contemporary relevance of how heroes are selected and celebrated. Critics highlight that the commemorations are becoming a political ritual benefiting the NRM, yet are divorced from the

everyday struggles of ordinary Ugandans. Similarly, in South Africa, Twala (2014) argues that the ANC continues to use selective 'triumphalist memory' to shape commemorative practices with the aim of building political capital for the party. This is demonstrated by the ANC's personalisation of national events such as the Sharpeville Massacre (commemorated as Human Rights Day), the Soweto Uprising (Youth Day), and Freedom Day celebrations. These events are dominated by ANC praise songs and speeches that promote hero-worship of the ANC while muting the economic challenges South Africans continue to face in the post-apartheid era (Dirks 2022). Therefore, commemorations serve as instruments of political control, used as propaganda tools by former liberation movements. The aim is to persuade people to believe that these movements are justified in continuing to rule since they led the struggle that culminated in the end of colonial rule. Consequently, the fact that former liberation movements throughout the African continent have largely personalised national commemorations supports the argument that neo-patrimonialism is entrenched in these political parties.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we blended general observation and media analysis with an interrogation of secondary texts to examine the politics of entitlement among former liberation movements that transformed into ruling regimes in post-colonial Africa. Observation proved particularly useful in the Zimbabwean and South African cases, where we directly participated as citizens and recipients of political messages. Political party election manifestos and media reports were among the documents we analysed to demonstrate that former liberation movements employed neo-patrimonial politics to cling to power. We used examples from former liberation movements across Africa to explain this entrenchment of neo-patrimonialism on the continent. Our research revealed that although geopolitical factors varied from nation to nation, former liberation movements generally employed strategies such as state narratives, education curricula, patronage, and welfare practices to justify their use of liberation heritage as political capital. Our argument is that even though some former liberation movements ultimately lost political power, their use of liberation heritage has been an effective long-term strategy that has sustained various former liberation movements across Africa.

5. Declarations

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