



Policy Brief

Too Old to Lead, Too Powerful to Quit: Africa's Old Guards Clinging to Power

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Received: 02 March 2026 | Revised: 12 April 2026

Accepted: 24 May 2026 | Published: 14 August 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23123917>

Executive Summary

In many African countries, political leadership has been dominated by a cohort of veteran leaders, often referred to as the "old guards." These leaders have maintained power for decades, sometimes beyond the typical retirement age, raising concerns about generational renewal, democratic deepening, and governance effectiveness. Their prolonged tenure often results from a combination of political influence, control over state institutions, and limited mechanisms for peaceful and democratic transitions of power. This phenomenon challenges the political, social, and economic development prospects of the continent as it stifles innovation, limits youth participation, and sometimes perpetuates authoritarian tendencies.

This policy brief aims to analyze the challenges and implications of prolonged leadership by Africa's old guards, draw a line between longevity equals stability and longevity breeds Democratic Deficit, and propose actionable policy recommendations to foster political renewal, strengthen democratic institutions, and promote inclusive governance across the continent.

Key message

- Prolonged rule by old guards in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroon, and Gabon weakens democracy and hinders development.
- Enforcing term limits, boosting youth participation, and strengthening independent institutions are vital for political renewal.
- Regional cooperation and support for civil society and electoral bodies are crucial for peaceful leadership transitions.
- Country-specific strategies promoting dialogue and inclusion can enhance stability and good governance.

Introduction

Many African nations have experienced extended tenures of political leaders who have dominated the political landscape for decades. Examples include leaders who have amended constitutions to extend term limits or used state apparatus like the military and sometimes majority rule in Assembly to suppress opposition. While some argue that their experience offers stability, which is being seen by others as positives, the overarching negative consequences include weakened democratic institutions, reduced political competition, and limited socio-economic progress. The persistence of



long-serving leaders in African politics creates a paradoxical situation where they are considered **"too old to lead"** effectively yet **"too powerful to quit"** due to their entrenched political networks and institutional control. This dynamic undermines democratic processes, inhibits political pluralism, and often results in governance deficits. It also exacerbates generational divides, marginalizes youth and emerging leaders, and impedes sustainable development by perpetuating policies and leadership styles that may no longer be responsive to contemporary challenges.

Addressing the Challenge of Africa's Old Guards Clinging to Power and its Implications.

Several African countries exemplify the challenge of prolonged leadership by old guards. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe ruled for nearly four decades before his ousting in 2017, but the political influence of the veteran leader remains strong. Despite Mugabe's departure, the ruling party ZANU-PF retains strong control, limiting political pluralism and youth participation. Economic challenges persist under long-term leadership structures, and according to BTI Transformation Index, most of the country's challenges have remained unaddressed. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986, repeatedly amending the constitution to extend his rule. His extended rule has weakened democratic institutions, marginalized opposition, and limited youth political space despite a large young population. While much in the overall dynamics of Uganda's politics and economy remains similar to recent years, developments in the civic and political spheres are worrying. Democratic governance continues to deteriorate, civic space is shrinking and political repression is on the rise. Cameroon's Paul Biya has led since 1982, making him one of Africa's longest-serving leaders. The nation lacks effective governance that could facilitate genuine political and economic transformation. Structural constraints are intensified by poor decision-making primarily focused on the political survival of the regime instead of the survival of the nation. Gabon's Ali Bongo maintained power since 2009, following his father's 41-year rule and was only ousted by a coup in August 2023. Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso's election success this March 2026 will extend his nearly 42 years in power. Similar situations in Equatorial Guinea with Teodoro Obiang Nguema and Ivory Coast Alassane Ouattara. These leaders have consolidated power through constitutional changes, control of security forces, and limited political competition, raising concerns about democratic governance and development within their respective countries.

The implications for these prolong stay are enormous, some of which include; *democratic backsliding*, where long-serving leaders often consolidate power by weakening checks and balances, manipulating electoral processes, and suppressing opposition. This erosion of democratic norms leads to authoritarianism, diminished political freedoms, and reduced public trust in governance. There is equally *limited political pluralism*, where the dominance of entrenched leaders discourages competition and innovation in politics. Opposition parties and emerging leaders face barriers, leading to political stagnation and reduced accountability. Moreover, there is *youth marginalization*. Africa has one of the youngest populations globally. However, prolonged leadership by older generations restricts youth representation and participation in decision-making, fostering political disillusionment and potential unrest. Last but not the least we have *institutional weakness*. Here, the concentration of power in a few hands undermines the independence and effectiveness of critical institutions such as the judiciary, electoral commissions, and anti-corruption bodies, weakening governance and rule of law.



Longevity equals Stability Vs. Longevity Breeds Democratic Deficit

In many African countries, extended periods of leadership have often been equated with political stability. The argument follows that long-serving leaders provide continuity in governance, maintain order, and ensure the implementation of long-term development plans. However, this longevity frequently comes at a cost to democratic principles, often resulting in what is termed a "Democratic Deficit", a situation where democratic institutions, processes, and accountability mechanisms weaken, undermining true democratic governance.

In contexts marked by historical volatility, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic challenges, longevity in leadership can be perceived as a stabilizing force. Leaders with extended tenures can offer consistent policies and prevent disruptive power struggles. For example:

- **Cameroon:** President Paul Biya has been in power since 1982. His long tenure has been credited by some with maintaining relative peace and continuity in governance in a country with diverse ethnic groups and separatist tensions. However, this concept of relative peace was questioned with the outbreak of the '*Anglophone Problem*', which has plunged the nation into persistence chaos since 2016.
- **Uganda:** Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, is often seen as a figure who restored order after years of civil war and instability.
- **Republic of Congo:** Denis Sassou Nguesso has ruled for decades though interrupted, maintaining a semblance of national order.
- **Equatorial Guinea:** Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, in power since 1979, has held the country together amidst internal and regional challenges.
- **Ivory Coast:** Although not as prolonged as others, President Alassane Ouattara's tenure since 2010 reflects a move towards political continuity after years of civil conflict.

In these cases, longevity can foster a stable environment, avoiding the chaos of frequent leadership changes or violent coups. However, despite the veneer of stability, extended leadership often correlates with a decline in democratic quality. The Democratic Deficit manifests in several ways:

- **Erosion of Democratic Institutions, where** Prolonged leaders manipulate constitutions to remove term limits as has been evident in Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and the Republic of Congo. Furthermore, key institutions like the judiciary, electoral commissions, and legislature are being co-opted or weakened, reducing checks and balances.
- **Suppression of Political Opposition and Civil Liberties:** here, Opposition parties face harassment, restrictions, or outright bans. The events in Uganda, Cameroon, and a host of other are evident. Media freedom is curtailed, limiting public discourse and accountability, giving rise to shrinking civic space. Civil society organizations encounter pressure or restrictions.

These democratic deficits often exacerbate tensions despite surface-level stability. For instance: In Cameroon, Biya's extended rule has coincided with escalating conflict in the Anglophone regions, raising questions about the legitimacy and responsiveness of his government. In Uganda, Museveni's dominance has led to repeated election controversies and suppression of dissent (shrinking civic space), raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Republic of Congo's Sassou Nguesso has faced accusations of electoral fraud and human rights abuses. Equatorial Guinea



remains one of the most closed political systems in Africa under Obiang's rule, with limited political freedoms. In Ivory Coast, while Ouattara's leadership brought stability post-conflict, political tensions and contested elections persist, illustrating the fragility of democratic consolidation.

While longevity in leadership can bring a form of stability in African countries, it often comes at the cost of democratic health. The Democratic Deficit resulting from prolonged rule undermines governance quality, political pluralism, and citizen participation. For sustainable development and true stability, African states must balance the benefits of continuity with robust democratic institutions and practices that ensure accountability, inclusiveness, and respect for rights.

Conclusion

Prolonged leadership by Africa's old guards presents multifaceted challenges to democratic governance and socio-economic development. Addressing these requires a comprehensive approach that enforces constitutionalism, strengthens institutions, empowers youth, and leverages regional cooperation. Through these measures, African countries can foster political renewal, enhance inclusive governance, and promote sustainable development.

Actionable Policy Recommendations

1. Enforce Constitutionalism and Term Limits

- Promote strict adherence to constitutional provisions on presidential term and age limits.
- Regional bodies like the African Union (AU) should increase monitoring and impose consequences for violations.
- Support civil society and media to hold leaders accountable on constitutional matters.

2. Strengthen Democratic Institutions

- Enhance independence and capacity of electoral commissions, judiciaries, and anti-corruption agencies through technical assistance and funding.
- Foster transparency in electoral processes with domestic and international observers.
- Promote internal democracy within political parties to facilitate leadership renewal.

3. Empower Youth and Promote Inclusive Governance

- Implement policies to lower barriers for youth participation in politics, including leadership training, mentorship programs, and youth quotas where appropriate.
- Encourage civic education programs to increase political awareness and engagement among young people.
- Promote inclusive governance that integrates women, minorities, and marginalized groups.

4. Foster Regional and International Cooperation

- Leverage regional peer pressure and diplomatic engagement to discourage unconstitutional retention of power.
- Support multilateral initiatives aimed at democratic governance and conflict prevention.
- Encourage cross-border civil society networks for advocacy and monitoring.

5. Promote Civic Freedom and Media Independence



- Protect freedom of expression and support independent media as watchdogs of democracy.
- Encourage governments to engage in open dialogue with opposition and civil society.
- Use digital platforms to increase citizen participation and government transparency.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **Realpolitik**, ISSN 3139-1443 (Online). In Volume 2 (2026), Issue 2 (May - Aug). The journal is published and managed by **Erudexa Publishing**.

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal subjects.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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