



The Ageing Political Syndrome in Developing Countries

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Received: 10.05.2026 | Accepted: 06.06.2026 | Published: 09.08.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21858628](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21858628)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper reviews critically the so called 'ageing political syndrome' in the context of developing countries, and focuses on the case of sub-Saharan Africa. It examines the structural, institutional and sociocultural processes that allow political elites to hold onto their position of executive power long after their "normal" retirement age, even though the region has a young population. According to the study, modern African gerontocracy is not just a cultural inheritance, but an intentionally engineered political system that is maintained through constitutional trickery, patronage systems, exclusionary measures, and blocking generational changes. It shows how the systematic violation of term limits, the use of pre-colonial wisdom to justify the authority of elderly leaders and the incorporation of younger elites in unconditioned patronage networks all hinder the consolidation of democracy in the context of the case studies presented here, in Cameroon, Nigeria and within West Africa in general. The analysis shows how this syndrome creates cascading effects: erosion of democracy and decay of institutions, intergenerational conflict, and marginalization of young people, policy paralysis and developmental stagnation, and the personalization of state institutions around ageing incumbents. The paper argues that the significant difference between Africa's youth population (with a median age of around nineteen) and the old age of the political leadership is a governance issue that jeopardizes innovation, accountability and legitimacy of the state. The study recognizes that the underlying causes of the above weaknesses lie not just in biological age but also in the institutional strengths and weaknesses and authoritarian political culture, but also points to the need for robust constitutional mechanisms, judicial independence, and institutionalized processes for generational leadership transition in order to realize sustainable democratic governance. If these changes do not take place, Africa's demographic dividend will continue to be undermined by political economies of stagnation perpetuated by the gerontocratic elites who hold power in these nations.

Keywords: gerontocracy, political ageing, power retention, constitutional manipulation, Africa, authoritarianism, democratic backsliding.

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1. Introduction

A "gerontocratic governance crisis" (ageing political syndrome) is often said to have hit developing countries, especially sub-Saharan

Africa, with the persistence of aged political leaders. It is a political syndrome that elderly political elites are able to gain state power, and then remain in the executive position for much



longer than their traditional retirement age, sometimes by constitutional amendment, electoral fraud, suppression of opposition, and control over economic resources (Adebayo, 2018; Ake, 1996; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). In many African states, the political office has become a permanent job that relies on prolonged patronage networks and institutional shortcomings. The phenomenon has taken a deep root in the political culture of a handful of developing countries that have weak leadership transition institutions, and in which the advantages of incumbency are so profound that they cast a shadow over the competitive nature of democracy (Joseph, 2014; Cheeseman, 2015).

The idea of executive retention is closely linked with neopatrimonialism, a governance form that is based on personal loyalty to the leader rather than constitutional principles or accountability (Mkandawire, 2015). In these systems, aged leaders often present themselves as essential interests of a nation whose rule is essential for peace, national unity and economic continuity. As a result, this political narrative can give leaders a cover to stay in power despite poor governance performance and growing public discontent. The personalization of power in many African political systems undermines institutions and fosters contexts in which those in power can twist and reword the constitution to remain in office. In many African States, the personalization of power diminishes institutional checks and leaves environments in which those in power can distort and rephrase the constitution to stay in office. This makes succession a very unpredictable and politically volatile process.

The dynamics of Africa's demographic reality versus the framework of political leadership is a stark contrast. The continent is known as the youngest continent in the world, with a median age of some nineteen years, but the political control is totally in the hands of the old men group (United Nations, 2022). This imbalance has resulted in what some academics have termed 'youth exclusion from governance', that today's youth are governed by leaders several generations older than them (Resnick & Casale, 2011). The gap between rulers and citizens poses governance challenges as younger generations

have different socio-economic priorities, technological orientations and political expectations from ageing political elites. In many instances, the failure of old age leaders to effectively respond to the rapidly changing economic and technological reality is one of the factors that contribute to policy stagnation and governance inertia (Mbaku, 2020).

In many African countries there is a conflict between a youthful electorate and gerontocratic leadership. The election of the 73 year old President Muhammadu Buhari in Nigeria in 2015 was a reflection of the general trend across the continent, where political leadership is still being retained by older individuals despite numerous calls for the inclusion of youth (Adebayo, 2018). Buhari's government was a continuation of a broader political trend in Nigeria, where a gerontocracy has been in power since the country's independence. In a similar fashion, Cameroon's President, Paul Biya, 92, extends his rule with another seven-year term in 2025, joining him as one of the world's oldest governments. Biya's twenty year tenure in office, which started in 1982, is a testament to the fact that political systems can be used to create a constitution that permits indefinite political rule (Cheeseman, 2015). Similarly, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, 92, has been the leader of Equatorial Guinea since 1979, and one of the longest-running authoritarian regimes in modern-day Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The longevity of old political groups is not coincidental, but is maintained by structural and institutional and economic dynamics. One of the reasons is the lack of democratic institutions in many developing countries. If there is little judicial independence, electoral commissions and legislative oversight, then the incumbent can change the constitution, intimidate opponents, and manipulate elections without suffering significant resistance (Diamond, 2019). One of the most frequent ways that ageing leaders have of extending their tenure is via constitutional engineering. Presidential term limits, age restrictions and constitutional interpretations are often eliminated, changed or misinterpreted by leaders who wish to continue to rule. Among

others, this includes the constitutional changes in Uganda during Museveni's tenure, Rwanda under Kagame, and Côte d'Ivoire under Ouattara that allowed for incumbents to stay in power for long periods (Posner & Young, 2018).

One more structural factor that contributes to the gerontocratic leadership in many African countries is the patronage-based political economy that exists in many of these countries. Political power may be used to give access to the resources, contracts, security apparatuses and Leconomic privileges of the state. As a result, the political arena becomes a necessity for the ruling class and its networks (Bayart, 2009). Ageing leaders, therefore, oppose political transition as it can result in prosecution, financial loss and political marginalization. In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, state institutions are often personalized around the leader, which can make succession a risky proposition for the leader and his supporters (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This can lead to the retention of the executive even when the public's approval is lacking.

The ageing political syndrome also has historical factors which play a significant role. Many of the African liberation leaders who were involved in the anti-colonial movement built stories of revolutionary legitimacy that continue to legitimate their political power long after independence has happened (Meredith, 2011). Such leaders usually characterize opposition movements as a threat to national sovereignty or to the political stability. Liberation credentials were used in times and again in countries including Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe and Uganda under Museveni to compensate for poor governance performance so as to keep the political legitimacy alive (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Thus, the divinization of liberation history can be a political tool for maintaining gerontocracy.

The implications of the "old guard" for democratic governance are many and multifaceted. One is democratic inertia. Often, long-serving leaders disenfranchise political rivals by silencing opposition parties, diminishing civil society institutions, and repressing press freedom (Freedom House,

2024). In such systems, elections can become ceremonial, rather than a real democratic process. No alternation of political office limits the accountability of the government in a democracy. Citizens can grow mistrust of democratic institutions over time, so they become apathetic or protest or cause political instability (Bratton, 2013).

Another consequence is policy conservatism and institutional rigidity. Political elites tend to become more conservative with age, focused on maintaining the political status quo rather than innovation and reform. The inclination can be a barrier to adaptation to the contemporary economic and technological problems like global economic competition, youth unemployment, digital transformation, and climate change (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). Governance models increasingly are demanded by younger generations, especially in the cities, which are technologically responsive, transparent, and participatory. Gerontocratic systems, however, often do not meet such expectations, since political decisions are centralized by older elites who have traditional orientations in politics.

The syndrome of aging also compounds youth marginalization and youth political disenchantment. Youth are the majority group in Africa, which means that if they are not included in leadership positions, they build resentment and alienation (Honwana, 2012). Social unrest and democratic dissatisfaction are related to youth unemployment, underrepresentation and low political participation. The #EndSARS and similar protests were part of a broader impatience among young Nigerians with the government and its lack of representation, particularly by its leaders (International Crisis Group, 2021). This may then raise the risk of social instability and fragility of state legitimacy due to the failure of ageing leadership structures to respond to youth issues.

Also, a long tenure of an executive may lead to corruption and decay of institutions. Long-term leaders often tends to weaken accountability mechanisms in order to shield themselves and their allies from accountability (Transparency International, 2023). There is a risk of politicization and subordination of anti-

corruption agencies, courts and security institutions to the executive interests. This institutional wear and tear leads to a loss of trust and weakens the effectiveness of the State. In many instances, corruption is institutionalized since political survival is more related to the distribution of patronage and the loyalty of the elites, than to merit-based governance (Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

It also brings issues of political capacity and biological ageing to the fore. While chronological age does not in itself impair leadership effectiveness, it can have an impact on the leader's capacity for cognitive flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to changing socio-political circumstances (Kurlantzick, 2013). In contexts of governance where technological literacy, economic innovation and global engagement are key concerns, issues arise about whether very old leaders can effectively govern complex modern states. Some critics consider the authoritarian nature of the power distribution among the aging elites to be a hindrance to generational change and to the opportunities available to the young and new talent equipped with new skills and fresh concepts (Rotberg, 2015).

The issue of gerontocratic government in Africa has been attracting attention in the international community and in the global media. In October 2025, major international newspapers shared editorial commentaries on the continuing ageing of African leaders who are averse to democratic change. Cameroon was a classic case of the “Big Man” political archetype where the political economy is personalized and institutionalized development is stagnant and incumbency is indefinite. These analyses indicate that many countries fall into a vicious cycle of political stagnation and low performance in development because of gerontocratic governance. The concept of the “Big Man” in postcolonial African political studies (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982) still influences the institutional framework of governance, in which the individual's authority is more important than that of institutions.

However, some researchers warn that governance issues can't be exclusively attributed to the biological age of leaders. They believe that

while age is significant, it is more basic explanations such as institutional weakness, authoritarian political culture, colonial legacies and economic dependency that explain the situation better. (Mamdani, 1996) In this view, young people within poor institutions could end up repeating the authoritarian patterns of their elders. The issue is not just old age, but an excessive accumulation of unchecked executive power in weak democratic institutions. Good democratic governance relies more on institutions than on the age of its leaders, on constitutionality than on accountability, and on political inclusiveness than on political or constitutional divisiveness.

These discussions have not stopped the ageing of the political elites as a governance issue that is a concern in many developing countries. This process is a manifestation of the broader contestations on democratic consolidation, leadership transition and institutional development. The pressure for changing generations, for political inclusion and for democratic accountability is expected to grow stronger in Africa as the youth population keeps increasing. The viability of many African democracies, therefore, may hinge on their capacity to build up their institutions to guarantee transitional leadership in a peaceful manner, uphold constitutional values, and foster political participation and engagement across generations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Gerontocracy

Gerontocracy comes from the Greek *gerousia* (council of elders), which refers to governments that are based on advanced age being the main criterion for holding political power. Traditionally, the powers of pre-colonial African societies were held by the elders, in the belief that "what the old see sitting, the young cannot see standing"—which means that elders possess wisdom, experience, and clarity of mind. (The Reporter Ethiopia, 2025).

Today's gerontocracy in Africa is, however, a qualitative shift from the old gerontocracy. Pre-

colonial elder rule was relatively consultative and was a part of systems of accountability, while modern political gerontocracy is an exclusionary system that prevents generational renewal. The Reporter Ethiopia (2025) states that the culturally rooted approach to good stewardship has now become a “political tyranny” that is limiting “inclusive governance” and leaving the continent's youth majority behind.

To distinguish from the Ageing Political Syndrome in terms of their pathology.

Older political syndrome can be theorized as a pathological syndrome of political systems where transitions are blocked, policy changes fail to take place and the structures of the system are unable to change. Political stasis refers to the lack of political movement or progress, which occurs when people are reluctant to accept new ideas, when the status quo is maintained, and when opposition voices are suppressed (The Reporter Ethiopia, 2025).

The syndrome is very pronounced in developing countries where institutional constraints on executive power are weak and where a political economy of patronage fosters vested interests in entrenched leadership.

The theoretical framework of political economy of longevity offers other analytical traction. In a European setting, Mackenbach (2013) found that political systems are important drivers of population health trends, and that authoritarian political systems have clearly different governance outcomes than democratic counterparts.

When this is expanded to look at African contexts, it would seem that gerontocratic regimes give rise to certain pathologies: the channeling of state resources into the maintenance of the regime rather than into developmental investment, the weakening of institutional capacity and the creation of intergenerational conflict.

The mechanisms of power retention will be covered. Mechanisms of power retention will be taught.

The erosion of the term of limits and

constitutional manipulation.

The main driver of the ageing political syndrome is the systematic elimination of constitutional term limits. As documented by GIS Reports (2021), "Several African heads of state are hanging onto power, doing so by changing the constitution.

This phenomenon, known as ‘third-termism’, has re-appeared as one of the most pressing threats to consolidation of democracy in Africa.

In Guinea, President Alpha Condé (82) won a controversial third term in office in 2020 by constitutional amendment, sparking protests and political violence across the country. Likewise in Ivory Coast, President Alassane Ouattara, 78, rejected a previous pledge to step down after his successor dies, ultimately winning to a third term with 94 percent of the vote amidst boycotting by opposition (GIS Reports, 2021).

In the Republic of the Congo, President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has been in office since 1997, is extending his reign with regular constitutional tweaks.

Cameroon is due to elect Paul Biya to a 92nd term in office in 2025, which the Washington Post reports is “almost certainly rigged.”

Biya has made the Cameroonian state into a personalist state, through the Constitutional Council's validation of electoral results and the systematic marginalization of opposition.

3.2 Patronage Networks and Elite Co-optation

In addition to constitutional engineering, ageing leaders perpetuate power by recruiting younger elites to join into patronage systems. According to the Reporter Ethiopia (2025), this is one of the most critical mechanisms: "The institutionalization of younger elites as part of patronage structures that buffer them from becoming a threat to the aging ruling elites, which in turn makes generational change structurally unlikely.

It is achieved by the distribution of state resources to loyalists, the development of dependent economic elites and the limitation of

independent political space. This is a closed system of power that involves potential rivals instead of defeating them, eradicating the possibility of generational turnover. Corruption is entrenched when power is concentrated within closed circles, away from public goods that are necessary (The Reporter Ethiopia, 2025), as mentioned in the discussion on African political structures.

3.3 The Instrumentalization of Pre-Colonial Narratives

One of the more subtle processes is the appropriation of pre-colonial governance narratives, to provide a legitimate basis for the current authoritarianism. In post-independence times, leaders who early on found fault with the European claim of the inability of Africans to govern themselves "rebadged their States with a variant of African exceptionalism: Western forms of democratic governance and ideas of human rights were foreign to Africa, as was the general right of exercise.

By using this rhetorical strategy, ageing leaders can simultaneously deceive their own citizens into believing demands for accountability and term limits are neo-colonialist impositions, while claiming to respect their elders and make them feel good about their rule. Ideologies of "Africanity" and "authenticity" can be used to deflect the truly self-serving motive behind the retention of power, morphing gerontocracy into an authentic culture of preservation.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Cameroon: The Archetype of Entrenched Gerontocracy

Cameroon: The model of entrenched gerontocracy is the archetype. The model of entrenched gerontocracy is the archetype in Cameroon.

Paul Biya's Cameroon is the most blatant of the ageing political syndromes in today's world. Biya has been the leader since 1982 and is expected to be in office for his seventh term this time when he turns 92 in 2025. This was

described by the Washington Post (2025) as a "triumph of the 'anachronistic 'Big Man'" over democratic rules, with the election being "almost certainly rigged" by a "plotline" Constitutional Council.

In the Cameroon case, the complete institutionalization of gerontocracy is evident. Slowly and over time the power of independent judges has been undermined, political opposition has been militarized and the constitution has been manipulated to ensure a succession of term limits. Biya has established a system whereby the transition of power seems structurally impossible: through the gradual removal of independent judicial power, the militarization of political opposition, and the creation of a succession of term limits within the constitution. Developmental implications are the continued lack of policy dynamism, the violation of rights of the Anglophone minority, and the exclusion of a young population whose lack of meaningful political engagement leaves them without a voice.

4.2 Nigeria: The Democratic façade of gerontocracy

Nigeria is an example of a "formal democratic" version of the ageing political syndrome. In 2015, when President Muhammadu Buhari was elected at age 73, after being in power in the 1980s as a military dictator, it was clear that they were able to use democratic institutions to hold power in their hands (Adebayo, 2018).

The formal use of term limits and regular changes in elections in Nigeria does not preclude the existence of gerontocratic norms in party rules that will disadvantage young candidates in gaining executive power.

This case in Nigeria is one example that distinguishes electoral democracy from a generational democracy. In the face of regular elections, important political party elites are nonetheless still dominated by old men who exercise control over nomination selection, funding of campaigns and distribution of patronage. This led to the development of a

"culture that cut Africans' youth out of the politics," Adebayo (2018) notes, with the leadership instead being made up of "mostly septuagenarians and octogenarians."

4.3 Regional Patterns: West Africa's Third-Term Crisis

The outbreak of the third-termism was rather sharp in the year 2020–2021, posing a danger to the democratic gains in the region. Faure Gnassingbé won a fourth term in Togo, following his father's lead, which began in 1967. In Guinea and Ivory Coast, the constitution was used to allow aged presidents to remain in office, sparking mass protest and political violence (GIS Reports, 2021).

These examples are illustrative of the infectiousness of the syndrome of ageing politics. If one leader is able to game the rules of the constitution, other regimes in the region are put under pressure to do the same and the cycle of democratic retrenchment is perpetuated. The results from the West African experience indicate that the syndrome is not only at the national level, but is also a transnational pattern of authoritarian diffusion.

5. Consequences of the Ageing Political Syndrome

5.1 Democratic Erosion and Institutional Decay

As the ageing elites exercise a system of power, the consequences are cascading on democratic institutions. The Reporter Ethiopia (2025) lists the following consequences as the primary: "blocked political transitions, lack of new ideas, resistance to reform, and the perpetuation of the status quo", which results in: "policy inertia" and "limiting innovation".

When leadership is being thwarted, institutional memory merges with personalist rule, and state capacity is undermined because merit-based procedures are replaced with loyalty-based appointments.

5.2 A Democratic Culture vs. the Government's Culture of Denial

The marginalization of the youth in meaningful political participation has a tremendous social impact. The Reporter Ethiopia (2025) observes that "Inclusion of youth in meaningful political participation creates inter-generational peace, while their exclusion creates inter-generational frustration which results in social unrest or supporting destabilizing populist movements."

The protests in Guinea, Ivory Coast and elsewhere in 2020 are a symptom of this frustration, as young people are out against political systems that are failing to give them a voice.

Moreover, the syndrome is responsible for talent drain, when bright young people leave for greener pastures elsewhere, and the nation's human capital pool is depleted. The vicious circle of political economy of gerontocracy is thus: the less they are included, the less can the state do, the less developmental outcomes they achieve, the less their political system is legitimate, and the more repressive action must be taken to keep the aged incumbent in power.

5.3 Developmental Stagnation

The implications for development are not only regarding governance but also economic and social ones as well. Avoid power concentration in closed elites networks; focus on resources on public goods, not on the regime. The Reporter Ethiopia (2025) notes that "the entrenched leadership structures can also result in policy inertia, which hinders innovation and slows down the process of change that is needed. Gerontocratic governance is a major structural disadvantage in times of major change in technology and global economic integration."

6. Discussion: Toward a Comparative Understanding

This paper addresses African situations however it is not continentally unique that ageing is a political syndrome. Similar trends are observed in other developing areas, such as some parts of

Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America when compared to each other. The African experience is, however, unique in terms of the magnitude of the gap between leaders and populations, the continued use of pre-colonial narratives of legitimation, and the relative weakness of institutions to check executive power.

There are relevant comparative insights to be gained from the theoretical framework of political conditions and life expectancy developed by Mackenbach (2013). His examination of European contexts has shown that the life expectancy of the democratically governed states was higher than that of the authoritarian ones over the entire 20th century, and that this gap increased since 1960, when faster gains in life expectancy were achieved by the former than the latter from the improved control of cardiovascular disease and other death-causing causes, which were amenable to intervention.

Although Mackenbach's goal was to examine the health outcomes of the population, his basic conclusion that "political regime type strongly influences developmental course is echoed in the literature on gerontocracy in Africa. Gerontocratic regimes, which curtail the opportunity for renewal of leadership and adaptation of institutions, also limit the developmental options. The African case also sheds light on the particular susceptibility of post-colonial countries to the ageing political syndrome. The postcolonial trajectory established circumstances that allowed the liberation leaders to become very legitimate and then to exercise personalist power. It is as Development and Cooperation (2025) point out: Fathers of the nationalists who struggled to gain independence from the Europeans "proved them right" by "sacrificing the very democratic principles they had fought for — and by becoming 'presidents for life' through one-party states and constitutional manipulation.

7. Conclusion

The gerontocratic syndrome in developing countries, with its tendency to entrenched

gerontocracies in Nigeria, Cameroon and the rest of Africa, is a major problem in the democratic consolidation and development of these countries. The paper has suggested that the syndrome is not merely cultural, but actively cultivated by the policy of "constitutional engineering", "patronage co-optation" and the "utilization of anti-colonial narratives to give legitimacy to the retention of authoritarian power". The impact can be felt in several areas, such as the failure in democratic transition, social instability due to generational marginalization, and developmental inertia due to policy stagnation. Cameroon's Paul Biya, who was re-elected at the age of 92 in 2025, is a case of the most extreme version of the syndrome, whereas Nigeria provides a proof of its ability to work within formally democratic systems. But it takes more than words to tackle the problem of an ageing political syndrome and those words must be "youth empowerment." It calls for institutional changes that reinforce term limits in the constitution, increase judicial independence and establish effective mechanisms for kindling generational leadership transition. If such changes are not realized, Africa's young demographics will continue to be politically excluded from power by their old counterparts who, by virtue of their own structure, have seized and cannot let go of control of the state.

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