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Populism, Politics, Chinese Megaprojects and Misinformation in Africa

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Abstract

The connection between populism, politics, Chinese megaprojects and businesses are crucial discourses in Africa-China relations. The rising political tension during elections and the use of anti-Chinese rhetoric impedes the future of Africa-China relations. Hence, the need for pragmatic public diplomacy to address the encroaching influence of anti-Chinese populism on the African continent. The paper contends that anti-Chinese populism is a political currency and opportunistic tool for power acquisition, rather than a political culture in Africa. The study views populism as the consequent of cross social injustice, marginalization and lack economic opportunities and vulnerability of the indigent in Africa. The paper analysed anti-Chinese rhetoric on debt trap, corruption, and economic distress as well Chinese public diplomacy in Zambia and Kenya. It employed qualitative case study approach which reviewed and analysed books, journal articles and webpages. The paper call for attention on the rising anti-Chinese rhetoric and to rethink how populism, domestic politics, and Chinese megaprojects and businesses across Africa are interconnected intrinsically for better public policy formulation. It recommends and calls for pragmatic public engagement through increased Africa-China advocacy.

Keywords: *Populism, Elections, Megaprojects, Anti-Chinese, Diplomacy, Political Parties*

Introduction

The intersectional effect of populism, politics, and Chinese infrastructure investments and businesses in Africa-China relations has received attention lately. Concerns about debt trap, economic distress, and corruption have corresponding trigger on the growth of populism in Africa's domestic politics. This threatens the popularity of Chinese infrastructure projects and enterprises on the continent. The study argues that the emerging anti-Chinese populism is a political tactic rather than an African political culture. Populism, politics and the Chinese megaprojects in Africa accentuate the interconnectedness between Chinese development aid, domestic politics and public perception. The misgivings about Chinese development finance across the continent has been attributed to the rising outcry about corruption, debt profiles and defaults in loan repayment aggravated by the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic (Singh, 2020). Anti-Chinese populism in Africa does not only increase resentment against Chinese people but reputational crisis for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as well as other development assistance. Consequently, this led to cutback in Chinese development finance across the continent (Thiele, 2022). Pleased with the political impact, populist leaders in Kenya and Zambia used well crafted anti-Chinese messages against China and Chinese people to persuade African electorates (Daigle, Neulen, & Hofeman, 2018).

For instance, the Chinese the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been greeted with misgivings due to the intrigues in the domestic politics of African states and securitization by neoliberal opponents (Shah, 2023). The BRI was launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping as a strategic road map for development finance to build transport infrastructure across the world (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2019). The BRI and Africa's infrastructure deficit created affinity for the initiative. Several countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Ethiopia secured huge funding for

railway, road, and airport and seaport projects. However, as Chinese engagement increases so also, the positive and negative reactions. For instance, Alam lamented that “Chinese engagements continue to increase in Africa, the disenchanted portions of African populations will likely continue to perceive China as a domestic competitor and plunderer of African resources” (Aidoo, 2017, p. 8). As will be discussed later, anti-Chinese populism is anchored on these perceptions and misperceptions about Chinese development finance and businesses in Africa.

Bretton Woods institutions were the dominant providers of development finance in Africa before the 2000s. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditioned such financing on democratic tenets such as human rights, accountability, transparency, and good governance. Unlike western donors, Chinese development aid does not require normative conditions due to its principles on non-interference in the domestic affairs of recipient states. This approach upset the traditional western donors’ requirements (Galchu, 2018). The political elites in Africa support Chinese development finance in terms of concern for sovereignty, but public perception centred on Chinese presence in terms of competition against local businesses and labour force. For instance, Hitchens (2008), described the tension between local labour force and Chinese enterprises as “new slave empire in Africa”. The anti-Chinese narrative is further aggravated by the mainstream international media and social media misinformation. Hence, public opinion influence by the media and politicians does not only shape the perception about state-centric China-Africa relations but also people-to-people relations. Therefore, to explain the intersectionality between Chinese investments and domestic politics in Africa Political Economy Analysis (PEA) framework will be used.

The PEA underscores the “economic and political behaviour, and the understanding of how political institutions, social and political power relations, and the political and economic environment influence each other ...” (Van Breukelen, 2007, p. 46). Furthermore, PEA argues that political factors and international development interventions are interconnected (Jakupec & Max, 2019, p. 11) when the structure-human agency is integrated into the discourse. Thus, PEA resonates with the structure-human agency analytical approach which examines Chinese development finance and domestic politics in Africa. Also, populism discourse is used to buttress the structure-agent dynamics while highlighting the role of political parties and actor-specific in the rising anti-Chinese rhetoric. This paper utilised the PEA framework as lens to explain Chinese development finance the three associated trends: the merging phenomenon of populism, the increasing rejection of neoliberal internationalism, and the emergence of a new alternative in the Chinese model of development finance and rivalry to the traditional western donors in Africa (Jakupec & Max, 2019, p. 22).

Methodology

To explain how populism influence domestic politics and its impact on the escalating anti-Chinese rhetoric relating to infrastructure investments and enterprises in Kenya and Zambia, this paper used qualitative case study approach. The approach is hinged on the relativist ontology which contends that reality is not absolute but the product of many intersubjective views (Alam, 2021). As a result, the dynamic character of African perception resulting from the historical exploitation, perceptions are constantly being constructed and deconstructed in respect of the reality of Chinese engagement in Africa. Therefore, the ensuing growth of populist anti-Chinese rhetoric is a reality that cannot be ignored. The case study technique makes no claims to provide sufficient data for generalisation of findings; rather, it aims to shed light on the developing populism and anti-Chinese phenomenon in Kenya and Zambia to show common or distinctive characteristics (Farquhar, Michels, & Robson, 2020). Therefore,

qualitative case study chosen examined the pattern of responses from Chinese development finance, anti-Chinese populism and domestic politics.

Africa in the Global Web of Anti-Chinese Populism

Anti-Chinese sentiments are not particular to Africa. According to Markey (1978), in the nineteenth century, Australia witnessed the huge migration of Chinese into its goldfields. The Chinese migrants later became part of the Australian labour force and working class. The influence of Chinese people in the different economic sectors triggered widespread anti-Chinese sentiments across Australia. The sentiments were expressed in the election campaign manifestoes across the country. Also in the nineteenth century, the United States witnessed the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments following the arrival of large Chinese migrants. Chang (2012) explained that the politicisation of Chinese migration led to the promulgation of the Chinese Restriction Act in 1882. The Act curtailed the arrival of Chinese into the United States of America. Subsequently, Chinese migration was securitised which led to direct violence against Chinese in the United States (Lew-Williams, 2018).

Anti-Chinese sentiment also exists in Asia. For instance, in Myanmar, formally known as Burma, anti-Chinese riots broke out in 1967 through the 1980s. The anti-Chinese was root in the political economy and the intrigues of Cold World where Chinese were accused of communist activities (Han, 2017). Also, in Kyrgyzstan, anti-Chinese sentiment was attributed to Chinese economic influence (Swanström & Nyrén, 2017). The sentiment spread to Indonesia (Danubrata & Suroyo, 2017). Malaysia flared up because of the presence of large number of Chinese workers and businesses. Malaysia's former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad took advantage of the public discontent against Chinese during the 2018 elections and tagged his populist message as "Saving Malaysia" (Welsh, 2018, p. 87) to mobilise the Malaysian people for votes (Wai, 2018). Similarly, in Indonesia, Griffiths (2018) alleged that President Joko Widodo used anti-Chinese sentiment during the 2019 election against his political opponent under the National Movement for People's Sovereignty.

Anti-Chinese populism in the domestic politics of Africa is surging (Resnick, 2017 in respect of emerging Chinese infrastructure finance and businesses. The phenomenon is often interchangeably referred to as "anti-Chinese populism," "anti-Chinese sentiments," and "sinophobia." In anti-Chinese populism, political actors sensationalise the planning, investments, management and viability of Chinese megaproject. Therefore, anti-Chinese rhetoric is coined as a wedge issue. Wiant (2002, p. 276) defines a wedge issue as "a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarise the public in order to gain political advantage." Thus, public sentiment and negative perceptions about China are wedge as centrally political arising from the Chinese development finance in Africa (Sibiri, 2021, p. 9). Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 anti-Chinese sentiments has heightened because by default, megaprojects and critical infrastructure tend to attract huge stakeholders, hence, the chances of politicisation.

Conceptualising Populism in African Politics

Proponents of good governance and accountability from all over the world have taken note of the rise of populism. Populism has roots in human political history. Its worldwide forms peaked with the 19th century's expansion of democracy. The return of modern populism in the 21st century is embedded in the democratic process which tries to alter the political landscape of Africa.

Populism is generally viewed as a collection of beliefs that are specifically created as ideologies to motivate anti-elitism and anti-establishment (Mudde, 2004). The primary rhetoric of populism objectifies "the people," as its central thrust. From whatever angle it is looked at, the central theme of populism is about the people's power to change the political and economic condition of the people (Kazin, 1995). Kriesi added that populism is caused by the endemic economic distress, poverty and marginalisation in a state. It is responsible for the emergence of personality who act as saviour-like leaders and push sentiment against the elite and establishment (Norris, 2005).

Galston (2018) contend that;

Populism is not merely, as some observers have suggested, an emotion-laden expression of disappointment over frustrated economic expectations, resentment against rigged rules and special interests, and fear of threats to physical and cultural security.

The first wave of modern populist movements and political upheaval in Africa began in the 1960s, during the decolonisation era. The era saw the emergence of a political elite known as the compradors who acted who mobilised Africa people to resist colonial rule through populist rhetoric. After independence, several African governing parties evolved into powerful, authoritarian forces that maintained control over the state apparatus until they were ousted by military coup d'état. The second wave was defined by the fall of independence political leaders and the rise of military control and autocratic one-party systems. African populism grew from the middle of the 1980s to the 1990s until the end Cold War (Nkrumah, 2021).

The third wave occurred during the Post Cold War when widespread democratisation took place across the continent. For instance, populism became a campaign technique for achieving political goals. Subsequently, some of the populist leaders that emerged include Kenya's Raila Odinga, Senegal's Abdoulaye Wade, South Africa's Julius Malema and Jacob Zuma, Zambia's Michael Sata, Ivory Coast's Laurent Gbagbo, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Nigeria's Muhammad Buhari and Kenya's Samuel Ruto (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Mbete, 2015). The post-Cold War democratic era in Africa is characterised by persuasive and maligning speeches during elections targeted at gaining power. These leaders emerged amid discontent with democratisation process, socioeconomic problems, and anger at opposition groups' inability to unseat ruling parties in democratic government as opposed to authoritarian governments.

Anti-Chinese Populism and Power Struggles in Africa

The rate of Chinese investments covers megaprojects such as power, road, railway, airport, seaport and mining sector. This has also seen the rise in populism. These megaprojects and businesses have been politicised by domestic political actors who believe their goals are being threatened by the increasing influence of Chinese in Africa. In agreement with the assertion, Hess and Aidoo (2019a), affirmed that the political entrepreneurs in Africa exploit the common public perception about China for political purposes.

Conceptually, populism is construed around the notion of advancing wealth redistribution, social justice and common good while dismantling establishments and institutional violence. Those who criticise the tenets of populism, argue that it is a threat to the elite class and the international capitalist order (Jakupec & Max, 2019, p. 61). Populism is usually engrave in the political party manifestoes. These manifestoes reflect both the domestic and foreign policy

goals of the party (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020). On one hand, the right populist parties tend to align their foreign policy to reflect issues such as conservatism, national sovereignty, de-globalism and closed immigration policy. On the other hand, the left populist parties pursue open market, social justice, social security, free education and health service (Chrysosgelos, 2017). Despite the categorisation, political parties in Africa cannot easily differentiate its populist leanings. Therefore, they are not based on the right-left dichotomy. Populism in Africa is largely driven by the desire to acquire power without any clear-cut political ideology. Largely, African populism is about wrestling for power from the ruling party for policy overturn. Conversely, populism in Africa, is not driven by any coherent ideological leaning. However, the rise in African populism is occasioned by the inherent poor governance, social and economic marginalisation. The cultural backlash theory provides relevant explanation about the rise of populism in Africa. It argues that the rise in the number of voters supporting populist constructs is induced by both economic and social discontent over the negative effects of globalisation and neoliberalism, which is perceived as an existential threat (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, populism creates an antithesis between domestic politics and foreign policy as well as narratives on how development finance is administered for infrastructure development. It indicates the interplay between domestic politics, development finance, and power relations between recipient states, donors and the foreign publics (Makuwira, 2017, p. 30).

Bergmann (2018, p. 3) argues that populist rhetoric on foreign aid is constructed around the perception that political elite compromise state sovereignty for favours from donor states. The emerging trend of anti-Chinese populism raises concern about the future of Africa-China relations especially where people-to-people coexistence is in question. Although anti-Chinese is an emerging phenomenon, the way it is weaponised by opposition political parties for political gain is worrisome. For instance, instead of reflecting on the bad governance and weak institutions, populist messages tend to blame foreign investors and donor states. Speaking to the nature of perception on China, Žižek (2006, p. 555) maintained that “the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it.”

Discourses on Chinese Investment, Populism and Domestic Politics in Africa

Discourses on Africa-China largely emphasises state-to-state diplomatic relations. Hodzi argues that the classic narrative about foreign aid to Africa stress donors and state the main actors while passively underscoring the agency of political elites and citizens. Elites and individuals are important because persons with access to power tend to influence discourse on public policy and foreign policy of their respective states (Hodzi, 2018). For instance, the unfettered access to resources by the political elite is attributed to corruption and mismanagement of state resource, often, this smears the Chinese development finance as well. Although the kleptocratic tendencies of the elites is not directly associated with Chinese development finance but it hurts China’s reputation on the continent. Thus, elites in opposition political parties tend to blame the relationship between the ruling class and the Chinese government as well as investors being part of the reasons responsible for economic distress in Kenya and Zambia. Therefore, the acrimony among the elites is not necessarily about Chinese development finance and investment in Africa but the allocation of values as justified by Harold’s “who gets what, when, and how.”

Politics and Populism in Chinese Megaprojects and Investments in Zambia: Cases and Context

Selected cases will be discussed from Zambia and Kenya on how populism and domestic politics influence the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments and resentments in Africa. In Zambia, perceptions about the interactions between Zambian politicians and Chinese diplomats are interpreted as political interference especially during election seasons where the incumbent seek for re-election. The statement made Michael Sata the leader of Patriotic Front (PF) in 2007 at the Harvard University set the stage for antiChinese populism in Zambia. Sata criticised Chinese infrastructure and mining investments in Zambia. The rhetoric referred to China as exploiters, infesters and called for the deportation of the Chinese people. Sata's populist message advance the idea of collusion between the corrupt ruling elite and the Chinese. To spite China, Sata's party pledged to disregard the One China Policy by forging diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Lusakatimes, 2007). In subsequent rhetoric, China was accused of supporting the incumbent party, Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) during the 2011 elections (Hess & Aidoo, 2019, p. 10). The Patriotic front (PF) won the 2011 election but changed its stance on anti-Chinese populism (Matambo, 2019). This reinforces the argument that domestic politics and foreign policy are inherently inseparable. Therefore, the perception about how the state relate with donors affect public opinion and influence domestic politics (Kleibl, 2013). Therefore, domestic actors and the political milieu can enhance or impede the dispensation of development financing on megaprojects based on public perception (Stephen, 2018, p. 146).

Thus, Sata rode on the populist rhetoric against Chinese development finance and businesses in Zambia to win the presidential election in 2011. He was alleged to have used the China Card¹ during the 2006, 2008, but was heightened during 2011 presidential elections. Fraser (2017) described Sata's political campaign as not only confrontational but energetic to advance his populist goals. Particularly, in 2006, his party constructed a social identity which was antagonistic and dichotomised the masses and elites. He characterised the later as collaborators. The elites were blamed for urban crimes, inequality, corruption, unemployment, and debt burden from both western and Chinese donors. The rhetoric triggered anti-Chinese violence against businesses across Zambia especially the violent labour impasse at Chinese-owned copper mines (Hess & Aidoo, 2015b, p. 19). For instance, in 2005, 49 local workers reportedly died due to safety-related reasons in a Chinese factory which drew public outcry against Chinese businesses in Zambia. Also, dispute between the workers and their Chinese managers over low and discriminatory wages was reported. The dispute later escalated to kidnapping of Chinese. During the pay increase riot, Wu Shengzai was killed, and two Chinese managers were charged in court for attempted murder as confirmed by the 2011 Human Rights Watch report (BBC, 2012).

As seen in some of the election outcomes, Sata's use of China card increased the votes he garnered during the 2011 elections. He first contested in 2001 and got a vote share of only 3%, but by 2006 it rose to 29%. In 2008 the vote count indicated Sata earned 38% of the total vote cast. But by 2011, the use of anti-Chinese rhetoric gave Sata victory against incumbent president Banda. In his anti-Chinese rhetoric, Sata claimed that Banda's re-election was being sponsored by the Chinese government. His desperation to win the election earned him the nickname "populist opportunist" Sata garnered 42%, while Banda got 36% (Hess & Aidoo, 2015, p. 103). Although the ethnopolitical makeup of Zambia tends to determine elections in Zambia, however, the China card became game-changer for the PF to win the 2011 elections.

The China card divert the public's attention from the divisive ethnic sentiment while it unified the public against the Chinese.

Going West and Populism in Chinese Megaprojects and Investments in Kenya: Cases and Context

This section highlights the populist politics and an overview of Kenya-China relations. It also analysed the role of Raila Odinga and Samuel Ruto in promoting anti-Chinese rhetoric against Chinese infrastructure and businesses in Kenya during the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections.

The modern political history on Kenya-China relations cannot be told without a reflection on the 1960s. In 1964, Zhou Enlai's visited 10 African countries including Kenya. During the diplomatic visit he made the historical statement that Africa is in an "excellent revolutionary situation". The statement was misconstrued as a call for the communist revolution in Africa. Meanwhile, this was at the height of the Cold War which aggravated sharp criticism from the world capitalist bloc. Particularly, the remark was greeted with diplomatic displeasure by the government of Kenya led the former president, Jomo Kenyatta. President Kenyatta argued that it does not need another revolution, the Mau Mau anticolonial struggle was its revolution. The diplomatic row led to the severance of diplomatic relations between Kenya and China which lasted for 10 years from 1967 to 1978 (Chege, 2008; Xue, Ding, Chang, & Wan, 2019). Although the consequence of the statement was unintended, it helped to shape China's non-interference policy while strengthening of Africa-China relations. Daniel Arap Moi restored the relations in 1979 which resulted in the rise of Chinese investments in health, sports and road infrastructure. Mwai Kibaki intensified the relations through his "Look East" policy. It attracted huge Chinese investments in the information and communication technology and road highways. These megaprojects epitomised one of the huge Chinese investments during the era of president Kibaki (Waweru, 2020). Although Chinese infrastructure investments in Kenya cut across different sectors such as sport, road, railway, telecommunication, and real estate, the most politicised of the infrastructure investments is the standard gauge railway (SGR) under President Uhuru Kenyatta.

The populist National Super Alliance (NASA) led by Raila Odinga, a political coalition consisting of ethnic groups such as the Kamba, Luo and Luhya who consider themselves institutionally marginalised were opposed to the Chinese SGR megaproject. While the Jubilee government of President Uhuru Kenya and Samuel Ruto largely composed of Kikuyu and Kalenjin ethnic groups. The Jubilee party promoted the SGR as a game-changer for Kenya's economic development and geopolitics in East Africa. But NASA viewed the infrastructure differently. NASA's populist rhetoric was based on the allegation of collusion between China and the ruling political elite. NASA further claimed that the cost of the railway was inflated to provide kickbacks to corrupt politicians when compared to the railways in Ethiopia and Tanzania (Lesutis, 2022).

One of NASA claim was that the railway was designed to pass through Kikuyu and Kalenji strongholds for ethnic patronage to the president and his deputy's communities (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017). The NASA coalition condemned the railway megaproject as conduit for corruption, lacking viability and causing debt distress. It further dismissed the completion of the first phase of the railway in 2017 at the eve of elections as a strategy by the government and the Chinese to enhance Jubilee party's vote mobilisation. In addition, the opposition accused President Uhuru Kenya of situating the Suswa railway inland container depot on the property belonging to his family (Kivol & Steven, 2017). Accordingly, Brautigam and Tang

(2012, p. 11) recognized that political elites in Africa tend to misuse foreign aid and infrastructure investments from China to finance projects for the purpose of political mobilisation instead of development. Affirming and Tang's argument, Kenyan Senator, Isaac Mwaura, described the railway infrastructure as development corruption project (Mwaura, 2020). Although these accusations are domestic and political in nature, they are indirectly connected to the Chinese railway megaproject in Kenya and have been used to advance the power struggle between Raila's NASA and Kenyatta's Jubilee party.

Following the heated political campaign and the disputed 2017 presidential election which saw claims and counterclaims about who won the election, the election was cancelled by the Supreme court judgment for breach of electoral processes. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was ordered by the Supreme Court to conduct another election. However, Raila Odinga rejected the Supreme Court judgment. Rather, he preferred to be declared the winner outrightly. He was later sworn in by his party as the People's President. The political stalemate followed. The country drifted into chaos and was at the brink of widespread violence. The escalating tensions led to mediation to avert a repeat of the 2007 post elections violence. Thereafter, President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga reached the truce popularly called the Handshake. The handshake saw Raila backtracked on his anti-Chinese rhetoric on the SGR (Zwanbin, 2022). Thus, the handshake changed the narratives about the Chinese railway infrastructure in Kenya and kept the anti-Chinese rhetoric until the 2022 elections.

By 2023 election campaigns, politics of Chinese megaprojects and businesses resurfaced again. Jimi Wanjigi, the presidential candidate for the Safina Party, revived the populist narrative on the SGR. Wanjigi accused Uhuru Kenyatta's government of mortgaging the future of Kenya through the SGR Chinese loan (Nation, 2022). Although he did not directly mention the Chinese, the accusation disparages the China for the economic woes and debt distress being experienced in the country.

Meanwhile, as the handshake brought Raila closer to the government, Samuel complained of being sidelined by the president while Raila enjoyed more access to state power and resources. Ruto feared that the handshake will threaten his to become president by the end of Uhuru's tenure. In the meantime, Ruto also had an unwritten agreement with Uhuru to become president after him. This angered Ruto who saw that as betrayal. With Raila abandoning his populist politics to join the government, Ruto chose the populist route to power. He used the Hustler-Dynasty narrative. Also, anti-Chinese rhetoric formed part of his populist narrative. Ruto align his foreign policy agenda toward the West unlike his predecessors. He became very vocal against China and Chinese people. During the campaign, He reportedly promised to deport Chinese people and release the controversial SGR contract to expose the corruption claim about the SGR megaproject (Bartlett, 2022). The rhetoric appealed to his hustler base. Ruto won the election in 2022. His anti-Chinese posture did not change, although, he chose a more pragmatic approach which tried to play the in-between diplomacy but with more propensity to the West (Mitchell, 2022).

As promised, Ruto's government released the SGR contract in breach of the agreement between Kenya and China. Some of the clauses of the agreement demands clearance from China before the contract can be made public (Brautigam, 2022). Release of the contract appeased the Hustler support base who believed the Chinese lenders exploited Kenya (Nation, 2022). The government of Kenya also took over the management of the SGR from the Chinese AfriStar. The AfriStar was initially contracted by the Kenya Railways Corporation to manage the SGR.

The Chinese company was accused of running the railway at loss and perpetuating workplace discrimination against local staff (Otieno, 2022).

The politicisation of the SGR megaproject drove public opinion which in turn left negative impact on the coexistence Chinese small and medium businesses and their counterpart in Kenya. One typical example was the China Square incident which confirms the rising anti-Chinese resentment in Kenya. The China Square is a business established by Lei Cheng along with his Chinese partners to provide quality and affordable goods at the Unicity Mall in Kenya. Local traders and importers located at wholesale markets in Eastleigh, Muthurwa, Nyamakima and Gikomba markets were angered by the fierce competition posed by the China Square (Ciuri, 2023). Subsequently, huge demonstration broke out against the China Square for selling goods 45% lower than the market price. Demonstrators displayed placards with inscriptions such as "Stop China invasion-save our businesses, save our future generation", "Chinese must go!", "the Chinese cannot be importers, retailers, wholesalers, and hawkers". The China Square was forced to closed.

The Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS), the agency responsible for ensuring standards and quality invade the mall and seized some of the goods but were later returned for lack of evidence the mall was selling fake or substandard goods in Kenya (Africanews, 2023). After high level diplomatic interventions by the Chinese embassy and dialogue with Kenyan business community, the China Square was reopened. Significantly, the audacious statement posted by the Trade Minister Moses Kuria about the China Square on Twitter was viewed as an anti-Chinese incitement. Kuria stated that "we welcome Chinese investors to Kenya but as manufacturers, not traders". The anti-Chinese rhetoric received condemnation from China, prominent Kenyans like Raila Odinga and Miguna Miguna as well as from some members of parliament. Those opposed to the anti-Chinese trade policy criticised the minister for hypocrisy and sinophobia. Critics of the minister claimed that while western brand such as Java House, Carrefour, and Quickmatt enjoy favourable business environment, but Chinese businesses are singled out in Kenya. The answer lies in the body language of the government's anti-Chinese disposition (Kiprop, 2023).

Politics in Africa, Chinese Communist Party and Public Diplomacy

The rising resentment against Chinese investments is not unknown to China. As African politics drifts toward anti-Chinese populism, China recognises the dynamism in the social and political landscape of Africa. Thus, its public diplomacy is targeted at solving some economically and politically motivated issues. Chinese public diplomacy cover sectors such as the media, education, agriculture, health and academic exchanges aimed at advancing its foreign policy goals in Africa. For instance, China targets the political class through the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC). The ID-CPC is saddled with responsible to articulate programmes that will foster friendliness and cooperation between China and African party officials as conflict resolution mechanism where political tensions and misconceptions arises. The ID-CPC strategies involves party-to-party relations where strategic meetings, training, and party training schools are held. For instance, in 2018, the Chinese Communist Party pledged to train members of the Jubilee ruling party in Kenya and also provided 20 scholarships for studies on grassroots mobilisation, democracy, and party management (Nyamori, 2018).

The party-to-party strategy helped China to maintain peaceful and intimate exchanges with the political class in Kenya and Zambia, thereby (Scott, 2021) providing access to top decision-

makers in government cycle. The strategy also engages opposition parties, but more attention is given to the ruling parties. The ID-CPC is mandated to revitalise its party-to-party engagement as a public diplomacy tool to reach influential political elites and prospective leaders to fulfill Xi's "new era" global order (Hackenesch & Bader, 2020, pp. 1–7). For instance, between November 30 and December 3, 2017, the ID-CPC organised the CCP-World Political Parties Dialogue Conference in Beijing. The summit saw the attendance of 300 representatives from 120 countries. The CPC keeps open contact with young political figure even before they are elected or appointed into political offices (Zhong, 2007). China's interaction with political elites has been misconstrued as political interference in the domestic politics of African states especially by the opposition parties such as Jubilee in Kenya and MMD in Zambia. China tends to be accused by opposition parties for sponsoring re-election of incumbent governments or parties. The closeness of Chinese political elites and that of African ruling elites in Africa fuels the misrepresentation China is in collusion with the elite and interferes in African elections (Sibiri, 2021).

Reflections on Politics, Populism, Chinese Megaprojects and Businesses in Africa-China Relations

The intersection between politics, populism vis-a-vis Chinese development and businesses in Africa provide insights into the relevance of relooking Africa-China relations through the lens of domestic politics and pragmatic public diplomacy. The use of China Card as populist strategy in Kenya and Zambia shows the interconnection between domestic politics and Chinese development finance as well as businesses. Therefore, China Card act as a political currency used in exchange for power. The anti-Chinese rhetoric is not necessarily driven by patriotism but by the desire for power where populism serves as a means. For instance, the change of rhetoric by the Sata-led PF party from being anti-Chinese to defender of Zambia-China relations indicates that anti-Chinese populism in Zambian was a mere means to power.

In addition, Odinga Raila's support for the Chinese SGR megaproject in Kenya after the handshake also supports the argument that some of the anti-Chinese rhetorics are politically motivated. The handshake changed Raila's narratives on corruption and collusion associated with the Chinese railway megaproject in Kenya. President Ruto's in-between diplomacy where he plays between the West and China shows the fluidity of anti-Chinese populism in Africa. For example, both Ruto and Sata called for the deportation of the Chinese people, setting an unpleasant tone where Chinese citizens are targeted and not the state or China. However, none has been reported to have occurred.

Therefore, anti-Chinese populism in Africa is rooted in general discontent and the failure of African states to deal with human security challenges such as poverty, gender violence, unemployment, marginalisation, insecurity and institutional violence. Notwithstanding, it is simplistic to ignore the rising sinophobia across Africa and attribute it to only politicisation of Chinese megaprojects and businesses in Africa. Some of the tensions can also be linked to obnoxious actions of Chinese private businesses where bad labour practices, segregation and discrimination have been reported to have caused the anti-Chinese impasse. Although the 2021 Afrobarometer Report on Africa-China relations affirmed that Africans have positive perception about China in Africa, however, the report only speaks about state-to-state relations and not about Chinese people in Africa. This is often ignored by researchers. Considering the rising tension between Africans and Chinese, it is important to further investigate why Africans are susceptible to populist anti-Chinese rhetoric. The China Square saga shows that the

strategic approach to Africa-China studies should be focused on the structure-agency rather than the structure-centric approach that pays more attention to interstate relations.

Conversely, while China's public diplomacy promotes efforts toward closing the gaps in people-to-people relations in Africa, African political leaders keep the China Card open for manipulation and as means to power. Therefore, study noted that the pattern of anti-Chinese populism situates the ruling parties as pro-China while opposition party as anti-China. Once power flip to the opposition, the narrative changes as the case with Sata of Zambia and Raila Odinga's NASA coalition party in Kenya.

Conclusion

The paper established that Africa-China relations enjoy strong state-to-state ties. However, the nascent use of political and anti-Chinese rhetoric has introduced a new dimension to Africa-China studies. While the Belt and Road Initiative provided huge opportunities for development financing for Africa's infrastructure, migration of Chinese people into Africa is viewed with misgivings. The presence of Chinese businesses and workers is seen in terms of competition rather than collaboration. Therefore, populist rhetoric is driven by fear and suspicion about political collusion and the threat to local business opportunities. Therefore, politics and power are central to the use of the China Card in Kenya and Zambia. The collusion and corruption narrative against China indicates the fluidity of the rhetoric. Both Sata, Raila and Ruto backtracked on their initial harsh rhetoric against China. The shift in the anti-Chinese populism indicates that Chinese people are beginning to be targeted in the populist narrative evident by the statements of Sata and Ruto deport Chinese.

Thus, populism, domestic politics and foreign policy are inherently connected as Africa's political elite struggles for power. It is not uncommon to witness the emergence of anti-Chinese populism in Africa, particularly connected to the debt trap narrative and megaprojects. By default, since megaprojects attract both internal and external stakeholders, domestic actors with vested interest tend to politicise the planning, financing and implementation of the infrastructure. The debt trap narrative and economic downturn witnessed in Africa has created public vulnerability seen in outrage against Chinese in Zambia and Kenya. The study argues that the central issue associated with anti-Chinese populism in Africa is largely about the struggle for power among the political elite. The case showed in Zambia and Kenya confirms that anti-Chinese rhetoric is toned down once the political party and the elites gain power. Therefore, anti-Chinese populism on megaprojects across Africa is politically motivated to secure power. To avert the misuse of populism and avert social tensions, accountability, transparency and political decorum is required. Thus, public dialogue and advocacy will enhance peaceful coexistence between the Africans and Chinese peoples. By and large, the paper stressed that anti-Chinese populism in Kenya and Zambia is an expression of political tension among actors with vested political, economic and social interests while China is the referent object of the populist rhetoric.

Thus, Chinese megaprojects across the continent epitomise a political discourse in which African leaders weaponise megaprojects to galvanise local political support or vilify the ruling party and Chinese investments and businesses. Therefore, Chinese megaproject in Africa is an object of politics.

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