

# Reinterpreting Authoritarian Populisms: How Elitist Plebeians Shape States

Dan Paget<sup>a\*</sup>

*Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen*

\*6 Dunbar Street, Old Aberdeen, Aberdeen, AB243QY | daniel.paget@abdn.ac.uk | Twitter: @pandaget | danpaget.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3883-1649>

## **Biography**

Dr. Dan Paget is a lecturer in politics at the University of Aberdeen. He has taught at University College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies. He read for a D.Phil in Politics at the University of Oxford. His research lies at the juncture of political communication, party politics and political ideologies. His contemporary research is about African political thought, and spans elitist plebeianism, populism, restorationism, nationalism and republicanism. His publications chronicle Tanzania's changing authoritarian context and the fortunes of Tanzanian opposition party Chadema. Dan's current book project is about mass rallies and political communication in sub-Saharan Africa.

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## **Abstract**

Populists in power shape states: they pursue authoritarian projects of government. Yet not all those called populists are populist. Some are elitist plebeians. They construct themselves as ‘the (virtuous) elite’ above which fights for ‘the people’ below against ‘the corrupt (middle)’. I argue that elitist plebeians pursue a distinct state-shaping agenda. Like populists, they augment executive power. Yet they construct this not as the realization of the people’s will, but as the projection of accountability downwards. Unlike populists, they understand themselves as guardians, not peoples’ sole representatives, and so they understand rival opinions not as illegitimate, just as irrelevant. Unlike populists, they accept divisions of power as divisions of guardian-labour. However, they consider opposition to their rule as illegitimate. Altogether, elitist plebeianism is the source of a distinct authoritarian project. Therefore, studies of populist authoritarianism should be revisited. Elitist plebeian state-shaping projects may have been misread as authoritarian populist ones.

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‘If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary’ (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 2001: No. 51).

‘Populists in power’, many argue, share an authoritarian project of government (Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016; de la Torre, 2021). They share claims about ‘the people’, their will and representation. From these claim, they argue, stems a shared authoritarian populist agenda to refashion the state. They study this agenda in its constitutional and extra-constitutional variants under the subjects ‘populist constitutionalism’ (Blokker, 2019), ‘populism in power’ (Albertazzi, 2009) and ‘authoritarian populism’ (de la Torre, 2021). However, a reorientation of populism studies is under way (Dean and Maignushca, 2020), not least in Africa (Fraser, 2017; Paget, 2020a). Increasingly, studies are revisiting studies of populists, and arguing that not all those analysed as populist truly *are* populist. One sort of discourse, to which populism is often misascribed, imagines ‘leaders of the people’, but attributes elite features to them. Populism, defined as a thin-centred ideology or discourse, constructs a struggle between ‘the people’ below and ‘the elite’ above. If leaders are discursively imbued with elite characteristics as much as, or even more than ‘the elite’, the constructed struggle ceases to be one of below versus above, and so it ceases to qualify as populist.

Dan Paget develops a distinct concept to capture these not-quite-populisms: elitist plebeianism (Paget, 2020a). Elitist plebeians, he stipulates, construct ‘the people’ below and ‘the elite’ above, like populists do. However, they characterize ‘the elite’ as virtuous leaders of ‘the people’ who fight against a third group located between them: ‘the corrupt’. Many of those mistaken for ‘populists in power,’ he argues, are better analysed as instances of this hybrid of elitism and populism. In this article, I build on his work. I ask: how do elitist plebeians reshape states? I argue that elitist plebeian state-crafting differs from both its theorized populist and

liberal democratic counterparts. Based on this theorization, I argue that prior studies of populist state-crafting ought to be revisited. Not only are many so-called populists in power not populist; they may not pursue *populist* state-shaping projects either. Instead, they may pursue subtly different elitist plebeian ones. They should be analysed afresh.

I interpret the subjective forms which this state-crafting takes, in the discourses which those state-wrights themselves express. Elitist plebeian state-building arises from two distinct principles which I, building on Paget, develop and theorize as features of elitist plebeianism. The first concerns corruption, specifically where it is and how it should be remedied. Liberal democratic political thought and the republicanism it incorporates, claims that office-holders anywhere in the state, including at its head, may be corrupted. To guard against this inconstancy of individuals, it turns to the constancy of institutions. It advocates instituting 'legislative balances and checks' to stymie corruption and its source, tyranny (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 2001: No. 9 and 47). Elitist plebeianism inverts this principle. It claims that the body of the state is corruptible and corruption-prone, but that 'the (virtuous) elite' at its head is not. Accordingly, the '(elite) leaders of the people' are the ultimate antidote to corruption. This elite's role is to watch, Cerberus-like, for corruption in the body of the state. Therefore, elitist plebeians advocate reforming the state to enable this projection of accountability downwards from the apex.

The second such difference in principle concerns the relations rulers and ruled. Liberal democratic and populist theory agree that elected officials are representative of 'the people', although they assert different theories of representation (Urbinati, 2006, 2019). Paget is silent on elitist plebeianism's position on representation. I thicken the theory of elitist plebeianism. I propose that its proponents conceive of rulers as guardians that are responsible *for* 'the people' but are not responsible *to* them. Therefore, unlike populists, elitist plebeians claim that separations of powers are permitted. Unlike liberal democrats, they subject this to the condition

that ‘the elite’ sits in each branch of government, which makes the division of power really a mere division of labour. Unlike populists, elitist plebeians tolerate plurality in opinions. However, unlike liberal democrats, they subject this to the proviso that these opinions do not contest the virtue or wisdom of the guardian-rulers. Therefore, like populism, elitist plebeianism is the source of an authoritarian project. Seen through a (so-called) objective perspective, many of the concrete elements of these authoritarian programmes may seem alike. Nonetheless, they are presented and performed differently, suspended, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, in webs of signification spun by their authors (Geertz, 1973: 5). Articulated through populism, they resemble the performative refashioning of the state to enable the realization of ‘the will of the people’. They disassemble and eliminate the sources of constructed elite opinion and power, which are by definition illegitimate (Urbinati, 2019). By contrast, articulated through elitist plebeianism, they resemble the performative refashioning of the state to enable the guardian-elite to rule wisely on behalf of ‘the people’, unimpeded by disruption, which they suppress. In short, elitist plebeian state-crafting is distinct from its populist counter-part. Therefore, studies of authoritarian populisms as projects of government should be revisited and perhaps reinterpreted. Not only may elitist plebeians have been mistaken for populists in power. Their state-shaping may have been mis-analysed as authoritarian populism, when in fact they may be elitist plebeian.

I explore and refine this theory of elitist plebeian state-scaping by studying its applicability to the original case from which elitist plebeianism was abstracted: President of Tanzania John Pombe Magufuli (1959-2021) and the party he led, *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM). During his rule from 2015 to 2021, at least publicly, they spoke as one and so I study them together. I find that they closely resemble elitist plebeian state-shaping. Given the similarity between their political thought and that of other post-liberation parties, these state-shaping is likely to be mirrored elsewhere in Africa and beyond (Beresford, Berry and Mann, 2018).

To study political thought is to interpret meaning (Freeden, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Consequently, my analysis of discursively constructed state-shaping is fraught with the innate methodological challenges of interpretation (Geertz, 1973). These challenges are compounded by contradictions between the speech of different CCM actors, differences in their speech over time, meanings which are implicit, meanings which are only evident in context, and my non-fluency in Swahili, the language in which much Tanzanian politics takes place. To meet these challenges, I read texts in the context of other texts; I immersed myself in quotidian discussion of Tanzanian politics over nine years; I reflected on my interpretations and my positionality (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The ideas in this article are based on my reading of a large body of speech transcripts, YouTube videos of speeches, and tweets by President Magufuli and fellow CCM politicians over that period. However, to illustrate my empirical case with pith, I draw principally on a private compendium of over 3,500 newspaper articles, selected for relevance by the author over this period, complemented by citation of select laws and regulations.

In the next section, I introduce theories of populism and the authoritarian state-shaping project said to stem from it. In the following section, I elucidate how, following Paget, some discourse and thin-centred ideologies are ‘mistaken for populism’. I introduce the concept of elitist plebeianism and the state-crafting project that stems from it. In the third section, I ground the concept of elitist plebeianism in the Tanzanian case. In the fourth section, I explore the state-shaping pursued by Magufuli and CCM.

### **Populist state-shaping**

There are a number of theories of populism. I focus on the two most similar and commonplace ones: populism as thin-centred ideology and discourse.

The ideational theory of populism understands populism as a thin-centred ideology. It adopts Michael Freeden's framework for understanding ideologies (Freeden, 1996). For Freeden, concepts are essentially contestable and ideologies 'decontest' them. Ideologies arrange concepts to form frameworks through which the world can be interpreted. Populist ideologies images society divided into two homogenous groups (Mudde, 2017). The first is called 'the people', 'the mass' or 'the underdog'. The second is called 'the elite', 'the few' or 'the oligarchy'. The former is imbued with virtue and the latter with corruption. They are imagined as pitted each against the other in a Manichean struggle of good vs. evil. This lacks the theoretical expanse to form a full world-interpreting framework, but nonetheless constitutes a thin-centred ideology. This thin-centred ideology subscribes to a concept of the popular will and disavows pluralism. For context, some contest whether it qualifies as a thin-centred ideology at all (Dean and Maignashca, 2020).

The discourse-theoretic perspective understands discourses, much like ideologies, as partial systems that fix meanings (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). In their conception, populism does not take 'the people' and 'the elite' as pre-formed groups, or as homogenous ones. Instead, it constructs them through two logics of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). It renders unmet demands as equivalent. By thus extending this equivalential chain, and uniting those who hold them, it interpellates the demand-makers as 'the people'. It interpellates those against whom demands are made a 'the elite'. This constitutes an us/them divide. This chain of equivalence runs to the edge of the social, sorting everyone into 'the people' or 'the elite'. In other words, populist discourses bifurcate, just like populist thin-centred ideologies do. Populist ideologies make these us/them divides along a down/up axis (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). Therefore, what distinguishes populist from other bifurcatory discourses is that they pit the 'us' *below* against the 'them' *above*. Some adopt this discursive conception without endorsing the full Laclaudian ontology (Moffitt, 2020). While the discursive and ideational theories are separated by differences, they are also united by similarities, as authors of each school recognize.

Some, especially those in this discourse-theoretic canon, argue that populisms do not share a state-shaping agenda, let alone an authoritarian one (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Vergara, 2019; Moffitt, 2020). Nevertheless, for better or worse, a growing body of work argues that it does. According to these authors, while populism can act as a democratic corrective (Kaltwasser, 2012), it is also the proponent of a particular, at least semi-authoritarian project (Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016). It and its constitutional and extra-constitutional variants are studied variously under the rubrics of ‘populists in power’ (Albertazzi, 2009), ‘populists in government’ (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013), ‘authoritarian populism’ (de la Torre, 2021) and ‘populist constitutionalism’ (Blokker, 2019). For these authors, this authoritarian state-shaping project arises from its theory of representation. In the ideational conception, it arises from the theorization of ‘the people’ as homogeneous and the possessors of a popular will which is sovereign (Albertazzi, 2009; Kaltwasser, 2012; Mudde, 2019). In the discursive conception, it arises from the mis-representation of ‘the people’ not as the part but the whole of the social: *pars pro toto* (Müller, 2016; de la Torre, 2021). This programme is best theorized by Nadia Urbinati (Urbinati, 2019). She asserts that behind populism’s, thin ideology lies a thick one that theorizes ‘the will of the people’ as accessible only by intuition, not reason; as uniform; as infallible; and as expressed authoritatively by ‘the leader of the people’ (Urbinati, 2019). Populism, she argues, sees others’ claims to represent popular opinion as illegitimate. Accordingly, populists hollow out societal and governmental institutions that form and express popular opinion. They diminish or close entirely parallel channels of elected representation such as the legislature. They dissolve rival sources of power. They dismantle checks on executive power. Some studies take the objective authoritarian actions to be those that define it (Albertazzi, 2009; Kaltwasser, 2012; Albertazzia and Mueller, 2013). However, for such state-shaping to truly qualify as populist, they should be constructed in accordance with populist ideology or discourse as embodying the realization of ‘the will of the people’ and ultimately the dismantling of its elite opponents.



## **What is elitist plebeianism?**

A question asked with growing frequency in political science is: are those to whom populism has been ascribed really populists? One line of enquiry argues that many movements called ‘populist’ are far-right first and populist second (Brown and Mondon, 2020; Moffitt, 2020). Another such line questions whether some political messages meet the definition of populism at all, especially the messages of (so-called) ‘populists in power.’ I explicate this line of interrogation. While this has been articulated by Paget before (Paget, 2020a), this position is contentious, and rehearsing it is prior to developing the arguments that follow.

Disputes about the ascription of populism as thin-centred ideology and discourse alike focus on two questions: 1) what qualifies as the construction of ‘the elite’? 2) how must the (populist) leaders of ‘the people’ be constructed to remain distinct from this elite? Answers to both of these questions stem from what it means for a populist discourse to construct ‘the people’ as below and so ‘the elite’ as above. Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis argue that this axis ‘refers to power, status and hierarchical socio-cultural and/or socioeconomic positioning’ (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017: 311). Hypothetically, one might specify any number of features which a discourse must apply to construct this down/up dimension to qualify as populist. Whichever such features one chooses, if this discourse also divides society into two groups, then logically, ‘the elite’ must have more of this feature than ‘the people’. By the same logic, the leaders of ‘the people’ must not have as much as or more of it than ‘the elite’. If they do, and insofar as they approach doing so, the Manichean struggle ceases to cut across the down/up axis, diving those below against those above. Instead, it also runs parallel to it, pitting one constructed elite against another. Therefore, the discourse thus constructing these groups and conflict ceases to meet the minimal criteria of populism in ideational and discourse-theoretic terms alike.

This definitional question becomes particularly acute when considering (so-called) populists in power. Perhaps there is some conception of down versus up that truly excludes power. However, most populisms do not employ such conceptions. As such, if the constructed leaders of ‘the people’ take power, formerly populist discourses about them struggle to reconcile their vilification of the powerful and their positions of power. There are various ways that a down/up divide may be maintained. One is to locate power not in the state, but the deep state; or not in the nation, but the transnational order. Nonetheless many discourses simply transgress the definitional lines I outline above and cease to qualify as populist.

Some seem to suggest that ideational populisms define ‘the elite’ through their corruption, and therefore that these seeming definitional deviations are in fact consistent with this definition of populism (Mudde, 2017). However, if ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ were separated by corruption *alone*, populism would collapse back into a category that encompassed all such bifurcatory ideologies. On this basis, even discourses that constructed ‘the elite’ as ‘the hungry’, ‘the poor’, ‘the underclass’ or ‘the below’ as the corrupt ‘them’ would qualify as populist. Ascriptions of ‘populism in power’ read as attempts to resolve these contradictions of concept and case simply through a naming hat-trick. The suffix ‘in power’ is suggestive of a distinct variant concept which resolves this definitional contradiction, but no such concept or corresponding resolution is offered. In spite of those important differences between populisms and these deviant discourses, there are also notable similarities. Paget develops a concept to capture these partial populist resemblances: elitist plebeianism (Paget, 2020a).

This discourse differs from populism in the way it divides the social. While populisms bifurcate, elitist plebeianisms trifurcate; they divide society into not two, but three groups. Like populism, one group is interpellated as ‘the people’. Also like populism, another group is interpellated as ‘the elite’. However, *unlike* populism, this elite is constructed as not viceful, but

virtuous, and not the enemy of ‘the people’, but its ally. The enemy of ‘the people’ is instead constructed as ‘the corrupt’ located above ‘the people’ but below ‘the (virtuous) elite’ or ‘the leaders’. Therefore, elitist plebeianism, like populism, constructs an us/them antagonism between those below and ‘the corrupt’ above them, but this is complemented by the antagonism that sets ‘the leaders’ above and the same ‘corrupt’ below them.

The above features form the thin(nest) form of elitist plebeianism which consists of this construction of political groups and arrangement of their relations (Paget, 2020a). However, I move beyond Paget. I propose a more expansive form that elitist plebeianism can take. This incrementally thicker conception folds-in claims about the relation between ‘the people’ and ‘the (virtuous) elite’. Populists claims that the leaders of ‘the people’ are representatives of ‘the people’. By contrast, thicker elitist plebeianisms claim that ‘the (virtuous) elite’ are the guardians of ‘the people’. Guardian-rulers, like representatives, have the authority to speak for ‘the people’. The difference between representatives and guardians turns on their accountability. Guardian-rulers have authority to on behalf of ‘the people’ which does not arise from authorization by ‘the people’ (Dahl, 2008: Chapter 4). Like guardians of children, they are responsible *for* their wards, but not *to* their wards. The difference between guardians and representatives may also turn on for what they are responsible and who determines its content. Representatives advocate the *opinions* of ‘the people’. Guardian-rulers are responsible for the *interests* of ‘the people’. While ‘the people’ are the ultimate authors of and authorities over their opinions, the guardians, in this conception, are the ultimate authorities on ‘the people’s’ interests. Guardianship builds-in the idea that guardians know their wards’ interests better than the wards themselves (Dahl, 2008: Chapter 4).

A theory of rulers as guardians may nonetheless advocate their election. However, the purpose of the election changes. It ceases to be the selection of the representative with whose

opinions citizens most agree. It becomes instead the selection of the guardian that citizens deem most able and qualified (Burke, 1999).

### **Making elitist plebeian states**

A distinct state-shaping project emanates from this thicker version of elitist plebeianism. Like populist and liberal democratic state-shaping projects alike, elitist plebeians are animated by the anticipation of corruption. Unlike them, elitist plebeians imagine corruption to arise in the body of the state exclusively. They imagine that ‘the elite’ who sit atop the state to be impervious to it. Consequently, they differ from liberal democrat in how they propose that corruption be checked. They do not prescribe institutions systems to stymy it. Instead, they envisage ‘the elite’ as the ultimate security against it. They argue that the rightful role of this elite is that of sentinels against corruption.

Therefore, they advocate that the state be reshaped so that accountability radiate downwards from ‘the leaders’ at the apex of government towards the corruptible bureaucracy. Satellites and arms-length appendages should be drawn-in and under its gaze; institutions should be reformed to open and subject them to its scrutiny and punishment; and the apex should be empowered and capacitated. This prioritization of downwards-flowing accountability within the executive sets elitist plebeian constitutionalism apart from both liberal democratic and populist thought.

As elitist plebeians reject the republican-cum-liberal democratic idea that office-holders at the state apex are corruptible, they reject the corresponding state-shaping principle that institutional systems ought to check and balance their powers. In fact, to enable ‘the elite’ to fight ‘the corrupt’ in the body of the state, checks on and impediments to their power should be eliminated. This leads to a similar conclusion to the populist prescription that the limits on the power of the executive be dissembled, but with two differences. First, while elitist plebeians

advocate the disassembly of *checks* and *limits* on the powers of guardian office-holders, they tolerate the *separations* of powers; such divisions of power are acceptable insofar as they are conceived as merely the division of labours between members of ‘the (virtuous) elite’ at the apex of the state. Insofar as it is, this creates a system of cooperating arms of elite government that work together. In contrast, populists seek the diminishment or closure of separations of powers because they represent parallel and illegitimate rival channels of representation (Urbinati, 2019). Second, elitist plebeians construct and perform these changes as the enablement of rule by people best. In contrast, populists construct and perform them as the removal of impediments to the realization of ‘the will of the people’ (Urbinati, 2019).

Unlike populists as theorized, elitist plebeians tolerate a plurality of opinions. Indeed, they may welcome constructive criticism. As elitist plebeians do not subscribe to the (disfigured) populist conception of representation, popular opinion need not be uniform, and variety in opinions does not mean contradiction of ‘the will of the people.’ However, any such solicitation of criticism is merely consultative. This tolerance is subject to a proviso. As rulers know best, their actions best serve ‘the people’, and opposition to their actions harms ‘the people’. Therefore, such opposition is illegitimate. The extremity of these authoritarian conclusions depends how the programme of ‘the leaders’ and the interests of ‘the people’ are conceived. Insofar as they are constructed as important, or indeed imperative, the more intolerable the harm that criticism and opposition is and the greater the extremity of the authoritarian measures which may be justified to stymy them. These claims form justifications of censorship and the elimination of societal bodies that consistently transgress these boundaries on speech. Those actions may take similar forms to the dismantling and silencing which it is theorized that populists advocate. Nonetheless, once again, these actions are imbued with different meanings. Elitist plebeians construct and perform them as the suppression of voices that prevent wise

rulers from acting on behalf of the people. Populists, as theorized, construct and perform them as the eradicate of elite machinations against ‘the will of the people.’

### **‘The leaders’ vs. ‘the corrupt’**

Some argue that Magufuli exhibited populism (Jacob and Pedersen, 2018; Poncian, 2019). However, this ascription is contested. As Paget argues (Paget, 2020a), Magufuli and CCM portrayed themselves ‘the leaders’ (*viongozi*). They did not portray themselves as an elite defined by inheritance or wealth. In fact, they belaboured their common beginnings. Instead, they claim to be the vanguard ‘leaders of the people’. They claimed that CCM ‘fights for the people, especially the downtrodden’ (BBC, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The eliteness of these ‘leaders’ arose from their superior capabilities. CCM often belaboured its leaders’ impeccable qualifications and experiences. It often boasted about Magufuli’s PhD in chemistry. In fact, Magufuli acted-out a trend of plucking technocrats from the civil service and professors from academia for senior positions (Citizen, 2020a).

He also made a habit of asking academics to form committees to investigate and advise the government when corrupt espionage or fraud had been discovered (*Guardian*, 2017; *Daily News*, 2017a). In fact, CCM often stressed the expert qualifications and sharp minds of its leaders when it acted-out discoveries of corruption and fraud. For instance, when he allegedly discovered manipulation of COVID-19 tests, his supporters celebrated his shrewd scientific methods, and called him, rather polemically, ‘a genius global leader’ (*Daily News*, 2020a). Their eliteness also arose from the positions of high office which they inhabited. As Japhace Poncian analyses, they emphasized that these positions made them privy to and custodians of knowledge and secrets that Tanzanian citizens were not (Poncian, 2019). This made them, in their eyes, qualified without parallel to judge and act on the nation’s behalf.

CCM's claims to epistemic superiority were and still are exhibited in how they constructed their programme. Magufuli and CCM intertwined elitist plebeianism with developmentalism. They constructed a programme of industrial development. The enactment of this programme, signified by 'development' would transform the country into a 'New Tanzania' (*Tanzania Mpya*) (Paget, 2020b). They portrayed the desirability of development, the importance of achieving it and indeed the actions that ought to be taken to achieve it as beyond dispute. Magufuli said that 'CCM brings development to Tanzania...There is no alternative to CCM forever'<sup>2</sup> (BBC, 2018). A vote for CCM was a vote for development, they often stressed (*Twitter*, 2020). They constructed 'politics' as the personal, partisan and self-interested competition between leaders (Paget, 2020b). They insisted that 'politics' ought to be confined to elections (Paget, 2020b). They suggested that in elections, citizens should focus on choosing the cleanest leaders with the best leadership qualities, especially their cleanness, rather than the best platforms (Giliard, 2017; *Daily News*, 2020c). In effect, they elevated their programme above contention and narrowed of elections to the selection of best rulers rather than a choosing between programmes. This construction of their programme of government is consistent with the elitist plebeian idea that 'the leaders' know best.

As Paget argues, Magufuli and CCM played-up, rather than played-down the authority and power that they wielded (Paget, 2020a). Magufuli made a habit of confronting 'the corrupt' (*mafisadi*) in public and castigating them there and then in mediatized events. As he fired one district official for unethical behaviour, he said 'we have to settle this on the spot, once and for all' (Masare, 2020). He instructed this official's successor, 'go and work hard.' Magufuli belaboured the immediacy and irrevocability of this dismissal through not only this staged confrontation. The decisiveness displayed therein connoted his executive power. Similarly, his instruction to the successor, given in the imperative, performed his authority over, and position of superiority in relation to this official. Other ministers emulated this style. For instance, the

prime minister gave cashew-nut traders allegedly manipulating the market a four-day ultimatum (*East African*, 2018).

Magufuli and CCM also made virtue a core feature of their high status, using performance as much as speech. Magufuli introduced a programme of austerity in government. He imposed strict rules about government cars, saying ‘we must make sacrifices’ (Makana, 2016). Sacrifice (*sadaka*) became a common term to describe this frugality in office. He also constructed virtue in relation to the greed they disavowed. He said ‘This is a public service not a gravy train. Anybody who came here to make riches should quit’ (Makana, 2016). These celebrations of abstention and austerity echo common reconstructions of founding-president Nyerere’s own fastidiousness (Fouéré, 2014). An accompanying feature of this virtue was their hard work. This industrious spirit gained iconic expression in Magufuli and CCM’s caption for the 2015 election: ‘only work here’ (*hapa kazi tu*).

The virtue of CCM’s leaders was also affirmed in relation to their constructed opposites which they so fervently fought. Upon his election, President Magufuli declared a ‘war’ on corruption. He imagined corruption in and between both society and state. In society, it inhered in ‘the rich’ (*matajiri*) or big business that sought to make illicit profits at the expense of ‘the downtrodden’ (*wanyonge*) or ‘the citizens’ (*wananchi*), often with the connivance of public officials. In the state, it inhered chiefly in the bureaucracy. Much of this corruption was petty (*rushwa*), and involved laziness, bribe-taking and theft by junior officials. Much of it was grand (*mafisadi*). In such instances, CCM leaders imagined ‘the corrupt’ high in the state. Nonetheless, they also portrayed them below CCM leaders themselves. As Paget argues, this relative juniority/seniority was acted-out in confrontations between CCM ‘leaders’ and ‘the corrupt’ (Paget, 2020a).

However, Paget, does not fully recognize that CCM leaders were constructed, specifically, as guardians. This leader-role was constructed in relation to this struggle with ‘the



corrupt'. This struggle against 'the corrupt' was on behalf of, but not necessarily by, 'the people'. Then-Publicity and Ideology Secretary Humphrey Polepole said 'the foundation of our party is the defence of the downtrodden. We will continue to ensure that it remains a refuge for the voiceless<sup>3</sup> (*EATV*, 2016). The notion of 'foundation' echoes the sense that this struggle is CCM's ultimate role or mission. This characterization also makes CCM an ally of 'the people', but does not integrate either into the other. In fact, the language of 'defence' and 'refuge', like CCM's wider language, stress the differences between the party's power and 'the people's' powerlessness. In similar terms, Magufuli that 'I know that many people live a low life... we [CCM] are struggling to bring development for them'<sup>4</sup> (Kitalima, 2017). Altogether, CCM constructed itself as a guardian-elite that ruled for 'the people'. It was situated at the head of the state and its eliteness stemmed from its impeccable virtue, high education, superior abilities, privileged knowledge and power. These constructions of eliteness often became most explicit and polemic in eulogies for a succession senior members of government upon their deaths and retirements during Magufuli's tenure (*Citizen*, 2020c), not least his own. Amid the various eulogies of Magufuli, he was celebrated for his vision, strength, sacrifice, grasp of details and data (Jacob, 2021). For context, this guardian-status was not constructed consistently. At times, Magufuli and his party spoke of promises to the public and public wishes which contradict this guardianship role and are consistent, instead, with representative role-conceptions. Navigating such elements of incoherence are inevitable parts of interpreting discourse. Therefore, this guardianship should be thought of as a dominant strain in Magufuli and CCM's thought.

### **Vigilance from above**

Tanzania's state was already consistent with some of the elitist plebeian state-shaping principles described above when Magufuli came to power in 2015. The authoritarian one-party state was only partially reformed during in the transition to multipartyism in 1992. This included its legal

instruments to censor media, prohibit protest and censor speech; and its extra-legal means to harm critics, prejudice media coverage, and co-opt associations (Tripp, 2000; Makulilo, 2012).

Magufuli and CCM waged a ‘war’ on corruption. Some actions in this war, like the dismissal of officials, led to changes in personnel, but not in structure. However, it also involved reshaping the state. Where corruption was discovered, state bodies were reformed so that supervision from above could prevent its recurrence. For example, it was discovered that the Tanzania Minerals Audit Agency (MTAA) had purportedly enabled tax evasion by Acacia Mining. In response, Magufuli took the MTAA to task. First, Magufuli dismissed the responsible minister and several senior officials. He formed a presidential committee, which subsequently recommended that the supervision of the mineral sector be intensified (*Guardian*, 2017). Accordingly, the government restructured the Ministry of Energy and Minerals by dividing it into two ministries with separate ministers and permanent secretaries to oversee them. It dissolved the MTAA board, and later it disestablished the agency altogether. It transferred its responsibilities to a newly-created Mining Commission with far-ranging powers, whose members were to be appointed by the president and Minister of Minerals (United Republic of Tanzania, 2018). Relatedly, in the energy sector, after dissatisfaction with incompetence and special interests in an energy parastatal, it dismissed its head and brought it under the supervision of the newly-created Ministry of Energy.

When CCM performed the discovery of corruption linking the Cashewnut Board to cashew-nut buyers, it took similar action. Magufuli dissolved the board, transferred some of its functions another such board and transferred its financial functions directly to the Ministry of Finance. He ordered direct state intervention in cashew-nut buying, and turned to one of the state institutions constructed as most disciplined and trustworthy – the army – to carry this out. Similarly, in the foods sector, Magufuli declared that sugar importation licenses had been granted

corruptly and to the detriment of local producers (Awami, 2016). In response, he transferred the authority to grant future licenses to the Prime Minister's office (Andreoni, 2017: 33).

State-shaping involved not only institutional changes, but changes in patterns of activity. State bodies which were deemed particularly crucial in the fight against corruption, or particularly prone to it, became the subjects of intense and recurrent supervision by the apex. After discovering cost-inflation in government spending plans, he said 'So I call on all district and regional heads of state across the country to be disciplined and government funds, so that we can learn to use money wisely'<sup>5</sup> (Kitalima, 2017). Many public offices received such attention, but in particular, the government intervened repeatedly to sack officials, dissolve boards or investigate the ports authority (*Citizen*, 2015; *East African*, 2021), the anti-corruption bureau (*Daily News*, 2018; *Citizen*, 2020b) and the revenue authority (*East African*, 2016; Malanga, 2021).

In congress with elitist plebeian state-shaping, they also augmented the powers of state bodies in or connected to the apex to investigate instances of corruption and to proceed in punishing them. For instance, they repeatedly reformed the Prevention and Combating Corruption Bureau (PCCB). Amid these reforms, Magufuli said "You are doing a good job at a "B" plus rate... As your leader, I want you to totally change. I want you to graduate to the "A" rate' (*Citizen*, 2020b). They reorganized the state's legal service. It created two new bodies: the Office of the Solicitor General and the Director of Public Prosecutions. This was presented as an attempt to increase the capacity and authority of state officials in these priority areas, and relieve the Office of the Attorney General (Kapama, 2021).

Altogether, they created what they presented as a well-resourced and motivated machinery that would root-out corruption (*Daily News*, 2020b). Magufuli said upon receiving reports from the PCCB and the Controller and Auditor-General 'thank God we have all government leaders with all the resources [they need]' (*Daily News*, 2020b).

In sum, Magufuli and CCM refashioned the state so that accountability would emanate downwards from the apex and stymie corruption. These performative changes either made corrupted and corruptible bodies directly subordinate to ministerial authority, or dissolved them and folded them back-into government ministries that were. Their most vital functions and powers were lifted and transferred to more trustworthy officials or bodies. Government leaders intensified their scrutiny of state bodies. To enable them to do so, they reformed and expanded an apparatus of investigation and punishment.

Political-economic studies of Tanzanian government reforms in this period analyse them as centralizations and power in the presidency, intended in part to centralize control of rent-seeking in particular (Collord, no date; Andreoni, 2017; Pedersen, Jacob and Bofin, 2020). I add another layer to these studies. I analyse how they were discursively and performatively fashioned: as the drawing-in of corrupt state bodies under the intense, scrutinising gaze of the virtuous apex from which accountability flowed.

Magufuli and CCM's activity in office was congruent with elitist plebeianism in several other respects. Consistent with the nominal tolerance of a plurality of opinion, and therefore unlike populist constitutionalism, Magufuli often at least outwardly welcomed the expression of 'constructive' opinions in numerous forums, especially from citizens, businesses and media (*Daily News*, 2017b). In fact, the more he trusted other bodies, the more he welcomed their criticism. In the 2020 election, which was heavily rigged, 97% of the directly elected MPs were from CCM. He told Parliament that it should offer 'constructive' criticism (Takwa, 2020). Similarly, he often invited petitions from the rally stage, and asked to hear the views of businesspeople at forums. Of course, this was a convenient way to display tolerance and deflect accusations of dictatorship. Nonetheless, it also exhibits a view of elite cooperation and plural elite opinion which deviates from the role of the populist leader as the sole interpreter of the will of 'the people' (Urbinati,

2019). There was room for diverse opinion, but only among those that accepted the wisdom and virtue of the regime.

Despite this outward tolerance of diversity of opinion, Magufuli and CCM fulfilled the authoritarian potential of elitist plebeianism. They led a sharp authoritarian turn. This programme began before Magufuli took office, but accelerated during his tenure and in particular in the 2020 election (Paget, 2021). This authoritarian action was justified principally in reference to the party's constructed platform. Their developmental programme, described above, promised enormous benefit for Tanzanians, and Tanzania. Moreover, they claimed that Tanzania was dominated and exploited by imperialists, who militated against their plan (Paget, 2020b). This made the fulfilment of their agenda a literally vital matter of national survival. In accordance with the thicker concept of elitist plebeianism, they portrayed the wisdom of their policy as beyond reproach. They portrayed their developmental project as an imperative. Accordingly, they portrayed (unconstructive) criticism as mere disruption and opposition as mere obstruction or sabotage. In the nationalist context of foreign threat, they portrayed (unconstructive) criticism as unpatriotic and opposition as seditious (Paget, 2020b).

## **Conclusion**

Not only do the movements often called populist contain (at least) two ways of speaking about politics; they contain two distinct modes of reshaping states. Elitist plebeianism holds that accountability should flow down from the head to the body of the state, not horizontally between branches of government. It should flow upwards from citizens only during elections, and only to enable the selection of elites, not their programmes. To this end, it refashions the states, extending the monitory and punitive capabilities of the apex, rearranging bodies in the state, drawing in arms-length bodies and appendages, and intensifying supervision and intervention. It disassembles checks and limitations on the power of the apex and tolerates

divisions of power as divisions of labour. It tolerates plurality of opinions in principles, but subject to such extreme conditions that in effect, it justifies authoritarian programme to censor dissent which is presented as unconstructive, and opposition which is construed as harmful to the interests of the people.

I have illustrated that this performative refashioning of the state was undertaken in Tanzania by Magufuli and his party, albeit imperfectly. This exemplifies these ideas and provides a concrete anchor for them, while also complicating them. Tanzania, though, is unlikely to be the only such case where states are remade in an elitist plebeian mode.

In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez's constitutional reform and wider state-shaping was analysed as a paradigmatic instance of populism. However, the speech of his successor Nicolás Maduro shows signs of elitist plebeianism. He constructed enemies of 'the people' (*el pueblo*) below him and his government in the bureaucracy (*el burocratismo*) and corruption (*el corrupción*) (VTV, 2021b). The fight against it, he suggested, was vital, because 'socialism is not possible if corruption exists' (Meza, 2014).<sup>6</sup> His performative state-scaping also resembled elitist plebeianism. He created an anticorruption body. However, the focus of this body was in the body of the state, rather than its head. This new body answered directly to Maduro as president. He promised to endow it with extensive resources and capabilities. During its formation, he said 'I need honest warriors' (Meza, 2014).<sup>7</sup> This reform was succeeded by new proposals which began in 2019 to reform the anti-corruption law, which was passed in 2021 (VTV, 2021a).

In southern and eastern Africa, other (post-)liberation regimes (Beresford, Berry and Mann, 2018) analysed as populist (Melber, 2018) speak in elitist plebeian terms and reform their states in the elitist plebeian mode. A notable example is the government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe. He and the party he leads are heirs to a liberation party formed in the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary tradition. Like CCM, this regime has long constructed itself as the

guardian-rulers of ‘the people’, and invoked its leadership in the liberation struggle to justify its elevation to this status (Tendi, 2013). Upon his ascension to the presidency in 2017 after a palace coup, Mnangagwa declared that corruption would no longer be tolerated (Sithole-Matarise, 2017). He presented his government as free of corruption and virtuous. ‘On these [anticorruption] ideals, my administration declares full commitment, warning that grief awaits those who depart from the path of virtue and clean business’ (*The Chronicle*, 2017) Moreover, he discursively located corruption in the bureaucracy. He continued ‘To our civil servants, it cannot be business as usual... Gone are the days of absenteeism and desultory application’ (*The Chronicle*, 2017).

Mnangagwa’s government performative state-fashioning took an elitist plebeian form. It created a system of anti-corruption courts (Mundopa, 2021). The constitutional amendment of 2021 gave the president a greater role in judicial appointments, including to these courts (Chimwamurombe, 2021). In parallel, it created a Special Anti-Corruption Unit, which operates from within the Office of the President. More widely, Mnangagwa extended Zimbabwe’s already considerable authoritarian practices and apparatus. Altogether, the case of Tanzania is unlikely to be idiosyncratic; many state-scaping projects analysed as authoritarian populism may in fact be elitist plebeian.

Looking ahead, future research should examine how so-called populists look down. Studies of contemporary ideologies, especially populisms, have neglected constructions of the corpus of the state – its bureaucracies and agencies – in political thought, especially constitutional thought. In a sense, studies of ideology and discourse have struggled to move beyond the focus of liberal democratic thought on the horizontal relations between branches of the state.

Finally, future research should recall that representation is not the only concept through which the relationship between rulers and ruled is understood. It should focus and explore and study the circulation of another idea that rulers are guardians of the ruled. Spreading authoritarianism provides hospitable concrete contexts for this idea. Elitist plebeianism, meanwhile, provides a hospitable intellectual context for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Original text: *‘Wanachama wa CCM... inayowapigania wananchi hasa wanyonge ili waweze kushiriki katika maendeleo.’*

<sup>2</sup> Original text: *‘Chama hiki kipo...kitaendelea kuleta Maendeleo kwa ajili ya Watanzania... Hakuna mbadala ni CCM hadi milele.’*

<sup>3</sup> Original text: *‘Msingi wa chama chetu ni utetezi wa wanyonge, tutahakikisha kinaendelea kuwa kimbilio la wasio na sauti.’*

<sup>4</sup> Original text: *‘Najua Tanzania watu wengi wanaishi maisha ya chini... tunajitahidi kubangaike kuleta maendeleo ili wanufaike na wao.’*

<sup>5</sup> Original text: *‘...hivyo natoa wito kwa viongozi wote wakuu wa wilaya na wakuu wa mikoa kote nchini kuwa na nidhamu na fedha za serikali, tujifunze kutumia fedha vizuri...’*

<sup>6</sup> Original text: *‘...no hay socialismo posible si existe corrupción.’*

<sup>7</sup> Original text: *‘Necesito guerreros and guerreras de la honestidad.’*