

# The Resignation of Old Leaders Does Not Guarantee a New Era of Leadership in Africa

*Miriam Abaya discusses whether the recent spate of resignations by long-serving African leaders is a cause for hope among Africa's youth.*

In 2017, the African continent experienced some drastic changes in leadership, as some of the longest reigning leaders have resigned from their positions of power.

Jose Eduardo dos Santos, after 38 years as president, [resigned](#) in August 2017. In November 2017, 93-year-old Robert Mugabe [was forced to resign](#) after a 37-year reign as Zimbabwe's president. Most recently, on February 14 2018, Jacob Zuma [stepped down](#) as president of South Africa after pressure from his party, the African National Congress (ANC). All three leaders left legacies of corruption and an economic crisis in their wake.

Many within and without the continent are happy to see these leaders go, and see their resignations as the dawn of renewed leadership on the Africa continent. Given that some of these former leaders had been in power for almost four decades, it would be easy to see hope in the end of their presidencies. One Zimbabwean [stated](#) that he had "been waiting for this [his] whole life" and that "it's time for new blood."



Both President Jacob Zuma and President Eduardo Dos Santos have stepped down from their positions in recent months

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However, it is not clear that the removal of old leaders has led to "new blood." In fact, with a second, clearer glance, it is evident that the new leaders in Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa might not be that different from their predecessors. Dos Santos' successor, [Joao Lourenco](#), is a member of dos Santos' party—he was the secretary-general from 1998 to 2003, and has been the party's vice president since 2016. Additionally, Lourenco was part of dos Santos' cabinet as the minister of defense. However, Lourenco has begun to signal his break with Dos Santos by [firing](#) Dos Santos' daughter and his other allies.

Mugabe was replaced by [Emmerson Mnangagwa, his former vice president](#). Though Mugabe fired Mnangagwa, no one should assume that Mnangagwa is not cut from the same cloth. He was a [guerilla commander](#) in the liberation war that brought Mugabe to power. Mnangagwa was also Mugabe's director of the Central Intelligence Organization and minister of justice, defense, and rural housing and finance before he was Mugabe's vice president.

South Africa's ANC has chosen Cyril Ramaphosa to be the new president of South Africa. Though Ramaphosa has promised to tackle the corruption that became widespread under President Zuma, he is from the same party and [was Zuma's deputy president](#). He cannot completely deny that whatever corruption occurred under Zuma was under his watch as well.

These "new" leaders have something else in common—they are all older men. Lourenco is 63, Mnangagwa is 75, and Ramaphosa is 65. Recent and upcoming elections in the rest of the continent, though promising, also offer nothing new in terms of leadership. The disputed Kenyan elections resulted in Uhuru Kenyatta's re-election. Kenyatta's opponent, Raila Odinga, [has been running for president since 1997](#). In 2015, Nigeria elected [former military dictator Muhammadu Buhari](#) to be the new president. Despite the 74-year-old's battle with illness during his presidency and the calls that he not run for reelection, no clear opponent has emerged for the upcoming elections.

The lack of change in leadership does not reflect the youthful demographic of the African continent. Africa has the [youngest population in the world](#)—200 million people are between the ages of 15 and 24, and that number is expected to double by 2045. Despite the prominence of the youth population in Africa, they face the highest amounts of unemployment and poverty on the continent. The youth population makes up 60 percent of all Africans that are unemployed. Within the sub-Saharan African region, youth unemployment is twice that of adults.

However, the youth population comes with high energy, creativity, and talent. They are the key to future prosperity in Africa, if African governments can figure out how to tap their potential. Unfortunately, African governments cannot meet these demands if they do not also possess the same energy, creativity, and talent as most of their population.

The removal of dictators that have crippled the African continent is a good thing. However, we cannot be content with merely more of the same. There needs to be a new generation of leadership on the African continent—leaders that are untied to the complicated histories of their countries' pasts, and who are committed to building opportunity and growth in their nations.

An era of young leadership will not be easy to obtain; the old dynasties of leadership will not hand power over willingly. But African youth have the upper hand. They represent most of the population, and have the technological and entrepreneurial abilities to bypass the previous kingmakers and make names for themselves. The time is ripe for a truly new age of leadership that will lead to growth and prosperity for all African peoples.

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**