



Age & Governance in Africa: 2015-2025

Mo Shehu, PhD

Gideon Onunwa

OCTOBER 2025



Executive summary

We set out to answer a simple but important question: when do African leaders actually step into power, and what does that say about governance on the continent?

By looking at average and median ages, entry pathways, regional differences, and gender representation, we move beyond stereotypes about “old leaders” or “out of touch” leaders and provide a fuller picture.

Drawing from data on 38 first-time heads of state across 53 countries, the analysis finds that the **median age of entry into leadership is 59 years**—roughly three times Africa’s median population age of 19. The research also highlights how the **pathway to power**—whether through elections, coups, or succession—often matters more than age in determining legitimacy and stability.

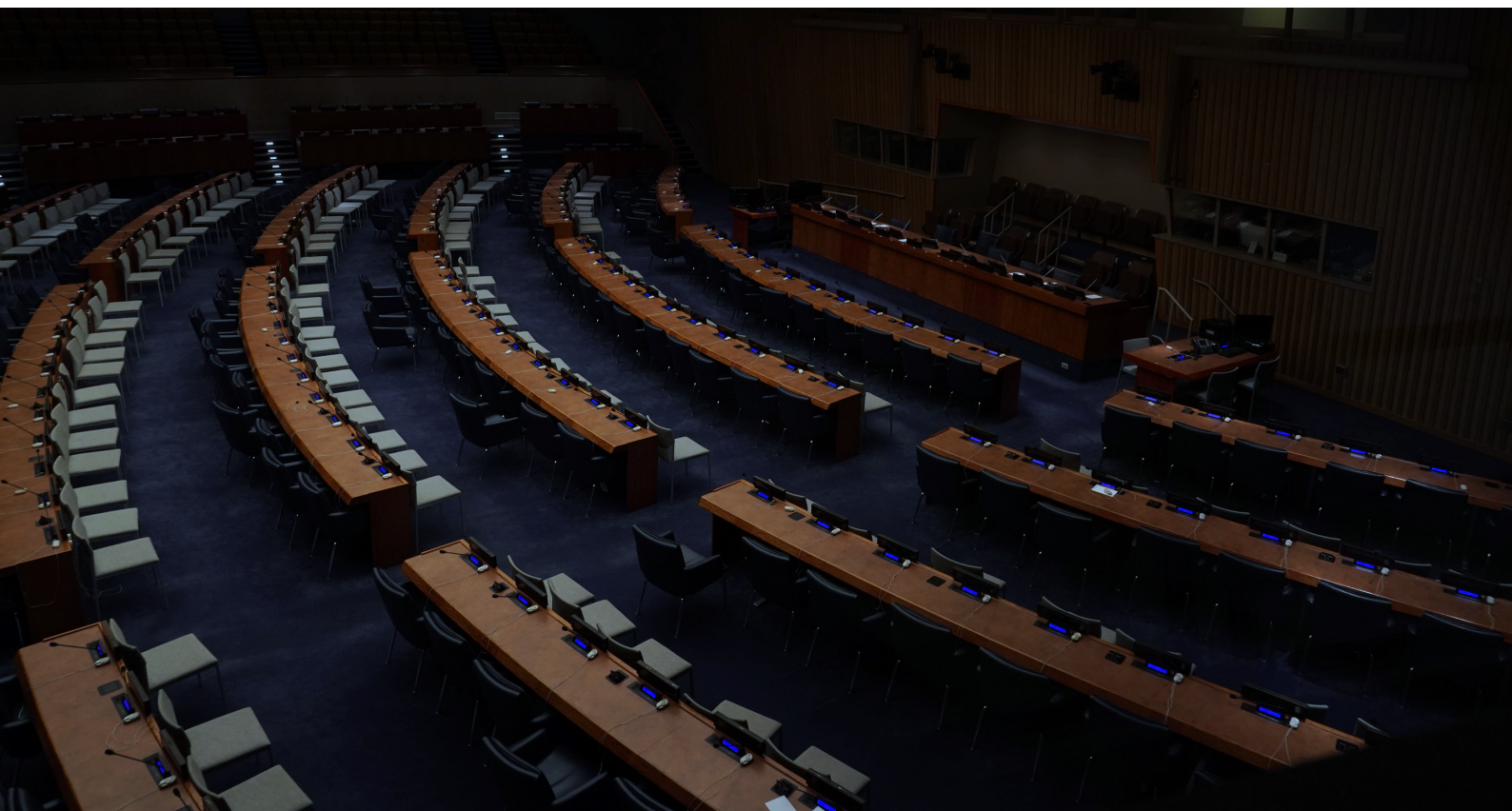
Key insights:

Most new leaders between 2015 and 2025 entered office in their late fifties or early sixties, reinforcing the image of aging leadership.

- Military coups have delivered power to younger leaders, while elections have more often rewarded long-serving political veterans.
- West Africa shows a surge of young, military rulers; Southern and North Africa trend older, with continuity through dominant parties.
- Despite symbolic progress, female representation remains extremely low, with only three women among all new leaders in the period studied.

Beyond demographics, the findings illuminate deeper tensions between continuity and renewal, stability and legitimacy, and the barriers preventing younger, democratically elected leaders from emerging. The report argues that Africa’s governance challenge is not simply about the age of its leaders but about the systems that shape how power is gained, held, and transferred.

Citation: Shehu, M., & Onunwa, G. (2025). *Age & Governance In Africa: 2015–2025*. Column Content.



Background

In everyday conversations across Africa, people often complain that leaders are too old, disconnected from the youth, and out of step with society. Think about radio shows where callers point out that their president is old enough to be their grandfather.

We decided to test that assumption by looking at actual data. When do African leaders first assume power? Are they as old as the taxi drivers, teachers, and students in our conversations think they are? And how do they compare to the continent's youthful population, where the median age is just nineteen?

Methodology

This study examined 53 African countries and identified 38 leaders who assumed the head of state role for the first time between 2015 and 2025.

Countries without leadership changes in this period, such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, South Sudan, Togo, and Uganda, were excluded.

For the included cases, we gathered official dates of birth and the exact dates of inauguration or appointment, then calculated age at entry. We classified each leader by pathway to power (elected, coup, constitutional succession, parliamentary appointment, or transitional authority) and tagged gender and region.

The dataset therefore represents the entire universe of first-time African heads of state in the last decade, not a sample. Sources included official government publications, electoral commission reports, international organizations, and reputable news outlets.



The results/numbers

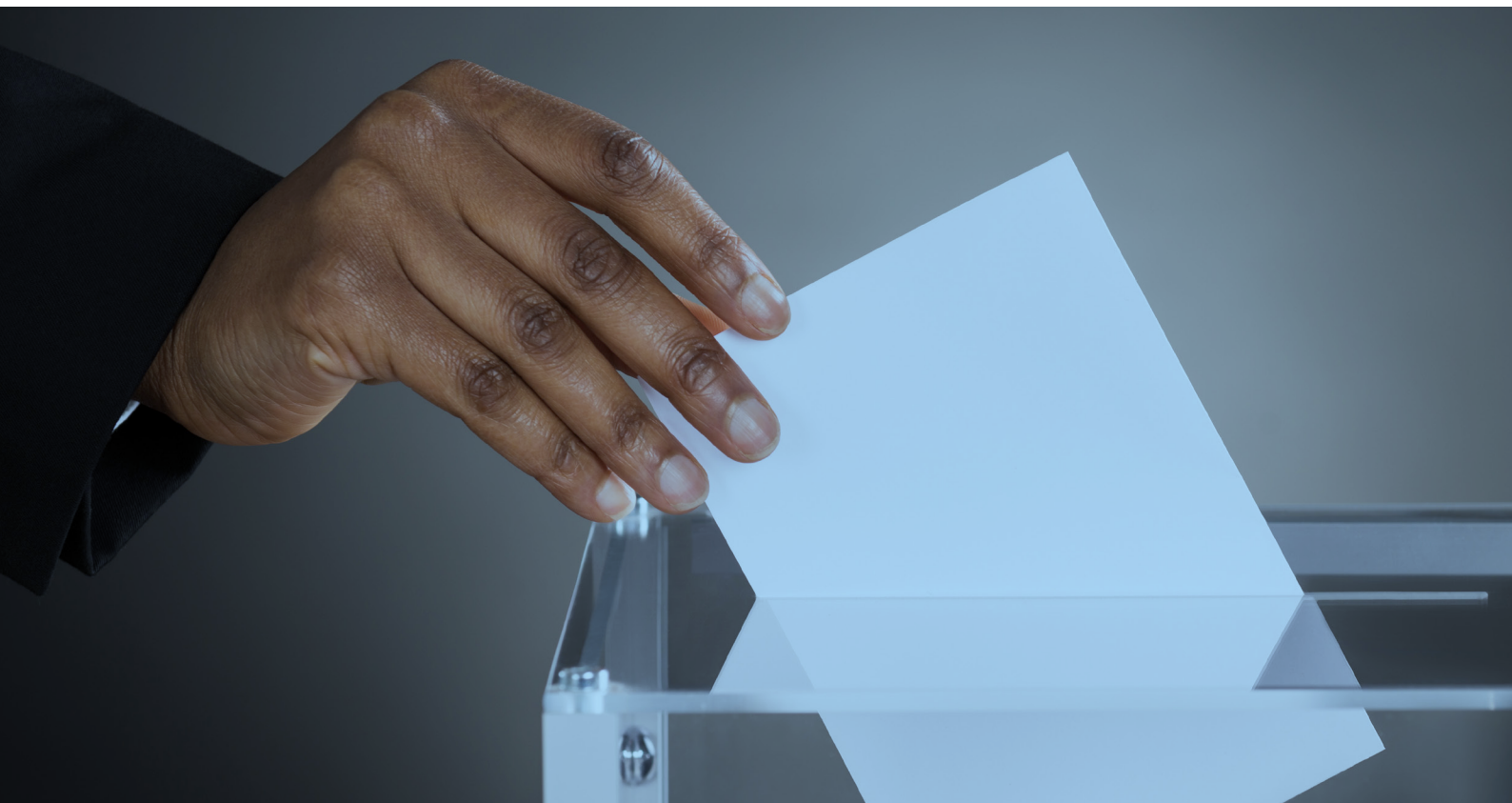
The average age at entry was about 59 years, and the median was 58.5. In other words, most leaders arrived in their late fifties to early sixties. This contrasts with Africa's youthful population. The full table of first-time leaders between 2015 and 2025 is shown below. Countries with multiple elections in the last decade are listed more than once:

Country	Leader	Gender	Date of Birth	Date of Entry	Age at Entry	Pathway	Source
Burkina Faso	Ibrahim Traoré	M	14 Mar 1988	30 Sep 2022	34	Coup	Source
Chad	Mahamat Idriss Déby	M	1 Jan 1984	20 Apr 2021	37	Transitional military	Source
Mali	Assimi Goïta	M	1983	24 May 2021	38	Coup	Source
Burkina Faso	Paul-Henri Damiba	M	Jan 1981	31 Jan 2022	41	Coup	Source
Guinea	Mamady Doumbouya	M	4 Mar 1980	1 Oct 2021	41	Coup	Source
Madagascar	Andry Rajoelina	M	30 May 1974	19 Jan 2019	44	Coup	Source
Guinea-Bissau	Umaro Sissoco Embaló	M	23 Sep 1972	27 Feb 2020	47	Election	Source
Libya	Mohamed al-Menfi	M	3 Mar 1973	15 Mar 2021	48	Transitional appointment	Source
Gabon	Brice Oligui Nguema	M	c.1974	4 Sep 2023	49	Coup	Source
Gambia	Adama Barrow	M	15 Feb 1965	19 Jan 2017	51	Election	Source
Liberia	George Weah	M	1 Oct 1966	22 Jan 2018	51	Election	Source

Burundi	Évariste Ndayishimiye	M	1968	18 Jun 2020	52	Election	Source
Sierra Leone	Julius Maada Bio	M	12 May 1964	4 Apr 2018	53	Election	Source
Seychelles	Danny Faure	M	8 May 1962	16 Oct 2016	54	Constitutional succession	Source
Somalia	Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed	M	11 Mar 1962	8 Feb 2017	54	Parliamentary election	Source
DRC	Félix Tshisekedi	M	13 Jun 1963	24 Jan 2019	55	Election	Source
Kenya	William Ruto	M	21 Dec 1966	13 Sep 2022	55	Election	Source
Mauritius	Ameenah Gurib-Fakim	F	17 Oct 1959	5 Jun 2015	55	Election	Source
Mozambique	Filipe Nyusi	M	9 Feb 1959	15 Jan 2015	55	Election	Source
Botswana	Mokgweetsi Masisi	M	21 Jul 1961	1 Apr 2018	56	Constitutional succession	Source
Tanzania	John Magufuli	M	29 Oct 1959	5 Nov 2015	56	Election	Source
Benin	Patrice Talon	M	1 May 1958	6 Apr 2016	57	Election	Source
Sudan	Abdel Fattah al-Burhan	M	11 July 1960	12 Apr 2019	58	Coup/ Transitional	Source
Burkina Faso	Roch Marc Christian Kaboré	M	25 Apr 1957	29 Dec 2015	58	Election	Source
CAR	Faustin-Archange Touadéra	M	21 Apr 1957	30 Mar 2016	58	Election	Source
Zambia	Edgar Lungu	M	11 Nov 1956	25 Jan 2015	58	Election	Source
Madagascar	Rivo Rakotovoao	M	12 May 1960	7 Sep 2018	58	Interim/ acting	Source
Seychelles	Wavel Ramkalawan	M	15 Mar 1961	26 Oct 2020	59	Election	Source

Zambia	Hakainde Hichilema	M	4 Jun 1962	24 Aug 2021	59	Election	Source
Nigeria	Yemi Osinbajo	M	8 Mar 1957	19 Jan 2017	59	Interim/ acting	Source
Mauritius	Prithvirajsing Roopun	M	24 May 1959	2 Dec 2019	60	Parliamentary election	Source
Tanzania	Samia Suluhu Hassan	F	27 Jan 1960	19 Mar 2021	61	Constitutional succession	Source
Cabo Verde	José Maria Neves	M	28 Mar 1960	9 Nov 2021	61	Election	Source
Niger	Mohamed Bazoum	M	3 Jan 1960	2 Apr 2021	61	Election	Source
Tunisia	Kais Saied	M	22 Feb 1958	23 Oct 2019	61	Election	Source
Mauritania	Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	M	31 Dec 1956	1 Aug 2019	62	Election	Source
São Tomé & Príncipe	Carlos Vila Nova	M	27 July 1959	2 Oct 2021	62	Election	Source
Niger	Abdourahamane Tchiani	M	c.1960	26 Jul 2023	63	Coup	Source
Angola	João Lourenço	M	5 Mar 1954	26 Sep 2017	63	Election	Source
South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	M	17 Nov 1952	15 Feb 2018	65	Constitutional succession	Source
Malawi	Lazarus Chakwera	M	5 Apr 1955	28 Jun 2020	65	Election	Source
Ethiopia	Sahle-Work Zewde	F	21 Feb 1950	25 Oct 2018	68	Parliamentary appointment	Source
Mali	Bah Ndaw	M	23 Aug 1950	25 Sep 2020	70	Interim	Source
Nigeria	Bola Tinubu	M	29 Mar 1952	29 May 2023	71	Election	Source
Ghana	Nana Akufo-Addo	M	29 Mar 1944	7 Jan 2017	72	Election	Source

Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	M	17 Dec 1942	29 May 2015	72	Election	Source
Mauritius	Barlen Vyapoory	M	1945	23 Mar 2018	72	Interim/ acting	Source
Namibia	Hage Geingob	M	3 Aug 1941	21 Mar 2015	73	Election	Source
Sudan	Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf	M	1945	11 Apr 2019	73	Interim/ acting	Source
Algeria	Abdelmadjid Tebboune	M	17 Nov 1945	19 Dec 2019	74	Election	Source
São Tomé & Príncipe	Evaristo Carvalho	M	22 Oct 1941	3 Sep 2016	74	Election	Source
Zimbabwe	Emmerson Mnangagwa	M	15 Sep 1942	24 Nov 2017	75	Constitutional succession	Source
Algeria	Abdelkader Bensalah	M	24 Nov 1941	9 Apr 2019	77	Interim/ acting	Source
Tunisia	Mohamed Ennaceur	M	21 Mar 1934	25 Jul 2019	85	Interim/ acting	Source



Interesting outliers

Ibrahim Traoré, 34, took power in Burkina Faso in September 2022 after a coup. His rule has had mixed reviews. At home, a vocal base praises his nationalist stance, the break with France, the push for self-reliance, and the promise to prioritise security. At the same time, watchdogs and international media describe a tougher environment: extended transition timelines, tighter controls on journalists and civil society, and allegations of abuses during the counterinsurgency.

Violence levels tied to jihadist conflict have remained severe even as the state has mobilised volunteers and sought new security partners. Net: high domestic enthusiasm in parts of the public, but rising concern about rights, accountability, and whether security is improving fast enough.

Mohamed Ennaceur, 85, served as Tunisia's acting president from July to October 2019 after Beji Caid Essebsi's death. His mandate was narrow and constitutional: keep the state steady and ensure an on-time transfer of power.

Under his watch, elections were brought forward to meet the 90-day deadline and the handover to an elected successor happened smoothly. Reception was largely technocratic and calm—he was seen as a caretaker who did the job and exited.

The next oldest first-time leader in our period was **Abdelkader Bensalah, 77**, who became Algeria's acting president in April 2019 after Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned amid the Hirak protests. His appointment was rejected by many protesters as a continuation of the old guard.

The interim period was marked by sustained street pressure, a fraught legitimacy debate, and arrests of activists. Elections eventually went ahead in December 2019, but turnout and trust issues showed how different caretaker mandates can feel on the ground compared with Tunisia's smoother handover.

Taken together, these outliers show why pathway and context matter more than age. A young military ruler can be popular yet hard on the media and opponents. An elderly caretaker can deliver an orderly transition, while another elderly interim can struggle for public acceptance if the street views them as part of a discredited system.



Pathways: Ballots vs. Barracks

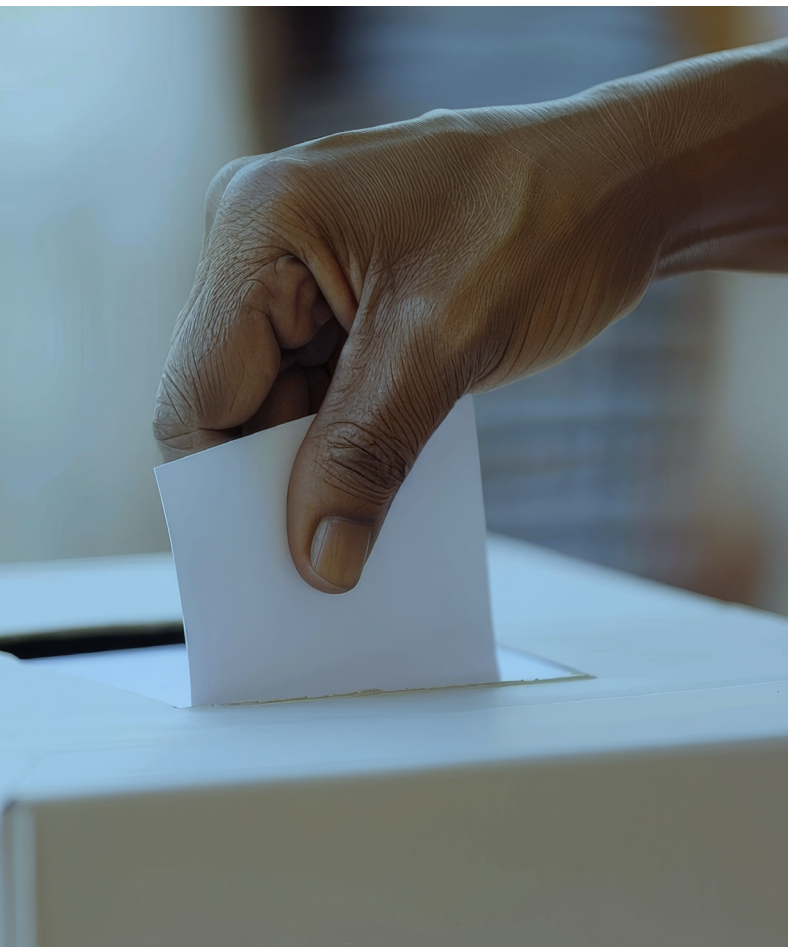
Younger African leaders mostly rose to power through coups between 2015 and 2025. Older leaders typically came through elections or party processes. There were exceptions to this rule, such as Niger's General Abdourahamane Tchiani, who rose to power in July 2023 via coup. This suggests that the pathway to power explains age differences better than cultural preferences or demographics.

The ballot pathway usually reflects decades of political apprenticeship. Candidates such as Bola Tinubu in Nigeria or Abdelmadjid Tebboune in Algeria came into office after long party careers, cementing the idea that elected leaders in Africa typically break through only after their sixties.

The barracks pathway, by contrast, has introduced some of the youngest leaders in Africa's modern history. Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso and Assimi Goïta in Mali became heads of state in their thirties by capitalising on discontent with security failures and corruption.

The split raises questions about accountability and trust. Ballot leaders, despite their age, often enjoy constitutional legitimacy and international recognition, even if they struggle to connect with youthful populations or deliver on campaign promises. Barracks leaders, despite their youth, frequently lack democratic legitimacy and must govern under sanctions, suspensions from regional bodies, and strained donor relations.

This contrast makes the ballots-versus-barracks divide one of the most important stories for African governance in the last decade and one that media and citizens will continue to debate closely.



Regional differences:

North, West, East, Central, South

West Africa produced the youngest new leaders, with most gaining power through military coups. Burkina Faso (Ibrahim Traoré at 34, Paul-Henri Damiba at 41), Mali (Assimi Goïta at 38), Guinea (Mamady Doumbouya at 41), and Chad (Mahamat Idriss Déby at 37) all experienced military transitions. There were exceptions to this: Cabo Verde's José Maria Neves assumed power at 61 via election, as did Burkina Faso's Roch Marc Christian Kaboré at 58.

These events point to a region grappling with instability and frustration with existing civilian governance. Voter impatience and disillusionment have created openings for younger military actors, making West Africa the epicenter of the continent's coup-driven generational turnover.

Southern Africa skewed older and relatively more stable. Leaders like Emmerson Mnangagwa in Zimbabwe (75), Hakainde Hichilema in Zambia (59), and Cyril Ramaphosa in South Africa (65) assumed office through elections or succession within dominant parties. These cases highlight entrenched party structures, where leadership change tends to follow predictable internal hierarchies. The result is a slower, more institutional path to power, often closed to younger entrants.

North Africa followed a similar pattern of older leadership. Abdelmadjid Tebboune of Algeria took office at 74, while Kais Saïed and Mohamed Ennaceur in Tunisia assumed power at 61 and 85, respectively. These transitions reflected a continuation of elite dominance in systems still shaped by decades of single-party or strongman rule. In both Algeria and Tunisia, even moments of

political upheaval produced older figures, reinforcing institutional resistance to youth-led change.

Central Africa was mixed. On one hand, Brice Oligui Nguema (49) came to power in Gabon via a coup, joining the trend of military-led generational change. On the other hand, countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (Félix Tshisekedi at 55), Central African Republic (Faustin-Archange Touadéra at 58), and Angola (João Lourenço at 63) continued to deliver older presidents through elections. This highlights the dual pressures of instability and institutional continuity facing the region.

East Africa saw leaders coming in through relatively stable political transitions. William Ruto (55) in Kenya and Samia Suluhu Hassan (61) in Tanzania—as well as her immediate predecessor John Magufuli (56)—all emerged through electoral or constitutional channels, reflecting systems with more institutional continuity. Sahle-Work Zewde in Ethiopia (68) also represents the continuation of elite appointment systems. While not youthful, East Africa's transitions suggest more consistent civilian governance relative to other regions.

These differences suggest that regional political culture, conflict exposure, and institutional design all influence not just who becomes president, but at what age and by what means.



Implications

The realistic pathways for regime change in the last decade have been coups for younger entrants and elections for older ones. For youth aiming for political leadership, waiting in line through traditional party structures may push entry into the late fifties or sixties. As a result, young aspirants may either abandon politics altogether or seek alternative routes outside formal institutions. In a continent where the median age is 19, that disconnect has long-term consequences for trust in democracy.

Most ruling parties only elevate those with decades of service, often closing doors to capable leaders in their thirties and forties. This weakens the middle layer of governance, where technocrats and reformers are often sidelined because they lack the longevity to rise through party hierarchies.

When formal systems seem closed, ambition flows to informal or disruptive channels—protests, populist movements, and military interventions. States may see more unrest and rebel activity that

undermines national security. Third-order effects spill into governance culture: with youth locked out, policy tends to skew toward the priorities of aging elites. Budget allocations for education, innovation, and digital infrastructure may lag, while patronage systems deepen as older leaders seek to maintain power. Over time, this erodes public trust and reduces civic participation.

Democratic parties and institutions thus need to rethink recruitment, grooming, and candidate pipelines. Without deliberate reform, parties will continue producing leaders out of sync with the demographics of their societies.



Recommendations

Africa's youthful population calls for youth-focused policymaking and representation in leadership. If the youth are tomorrow's leaders, as many politicians proclaim, then we should start grooming them for leadership early. Yet, if Africa needs younger but legitimate leaders, parties and institutions must adapt in fundamental ways.

First, **term limits** must be enforced strictly so that incumbents can't stretch their tenure and block generational renewal. The benefit is that younger leaders can enter sooner, but the drawback is that frequent turnovers can disrupt continuity if parties are not well prepared. Of course, the biggest challenge is simply respecting term limits. Despots, dictators, and military leaders aren't known for upholding constitutions.

Leadership development programs targeted at youth—covering political training, policymaking, and ethics—should be mainstreamed into party structures and even national civic education curricula. This could result in a pipeline of prepared candidates, but risks tokenism if these programs lack real power to influence succession.

Stronger youth wings within parties should not just exist symbolically but should have influence in candidate selection and policy debates. Done well, this creates inclusivity; done poorly, it reinforces patronage networks.

It also means tackling the **political weight of the military**. Coups have become the default fast track for younger leaders, but this undermines democratic legitimacy. The presumed benefit is that coups rapidly change leadership and sometimes respond to genuine

frustrations. Realistically, they often worsen governance, invite sanctions, and weaken accountability.

Civilian oversight of the armed forces, professionalization, and insulating militaries from partisan politics are essential. Building smoother, rules-based transitions—whether from one president to another, or from an interim authority to an elected government—can create an environment where younger leaders can emerge without destabilization.

International partners, regional blocs, and domestic civil society also have roles to play. They can push for electoral reforms, invest in youth leadership pipelines, and **withhold recognition** from unconstitutional seizures of power. These steps can encourage legitimate leadership transitions, though they can also spark accusations of external interference.

The media and universities can also **highlight younger political talent**, while business and community groups can **sponsor youth-run platforms** where young people articulate visions for governance. That visibility brings fresh ideas but can also expose young aspirants to co-optation or backlash from entrenched elites.

In short, what should be different is not only the age of those in power, but the rules, incentives, and ecosystems that shape how power is gained and held. A balanced approach—embracing both the energy of younger leaders and the institutional memory of older ones—can help African states avoid the extremes of gerontocracy or instability.



Final thoughts

Africa's leaders are much older than its people, but that's not the core issue. The real divide is between ballots and barracks. Age reflects the pathway, not just the person. The challenge for the next decade is to build systems where youth can reach power legitimately, without violence or shortcuts, while still valuing and drawing from the experience that older leaders bring.

This means two things. First, we need to stop reducing the debate to numbers alone. A 70-year-old elected president with legitimacy and accountability may serve citizens better than a 35-year-old who took power by force.

Second, we need to focus on whether our institutions can deliver both continuity and renewal. If systems keep producing leaders who are out of step with the demographics of their countries, then legitimacy will keep eroding. If, however, pathways are opened for younger leaders through fair elections, party reforms, and civic inclusion, then age becomes just one factor rather than the defining story.

In the end, age is a proxy for deeper questions about power, legitimacy, and governance. Africa's youthful population deserves leaders who represent not just their years, but their aspirations. The task ahead is to build institutions strong enough to deliver that, whether the president is 34 or 74.

About the authors



Mo Shehu, PhD

Mo Shehu is the founder and CEO of Column, a communications and research agency. He holds a PhD in Informatics and has lived and worked across seven countries and three continents, combining research and storytelling to shape public opinion in the public and private sector.



Gideon Onunwa

Gideon Onunwa is a research analyst with data science and IT certifications. He translates data into clear, actionable insights through visualizations and reports that inform smart decisions across industries such as health, science, communications, and technology.

About Column

Column is a research and communications agency helping leaders and organizations tell their stories clearly and effectively. Learn more about our work at columncontent.com.

Designed by: Joel Elemchukwu

