

## African Trends and Transformation: The Profiles of Sub-Saharan African Executive Heads of State since Independence

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This study profiles the heads of state and government who have ruled Sub-Saharan Africa since the advent of independence (roughly since 1960). The executive heads of state in Africa are often the most powerful players in the politics of their countries. During their time in office, some leaders have crippled the economies and lives of their people, often plunging their countries into civil war and conflict. On the other hand, there are also leaders who managed to bring their countries out of conflict and to steer them onto a new path of development.

The profiles of these leaders, as recorded in the Developmental Leadership Programme's (DLP) leadership database, provides a perspective on the leaders who have shaped policy and led African states. This study highlights trends in the profiles of executive heads of state over the five decades of Africa's independence. Key findings emerging from this paper are these:

1. Overall there is a positive trend in the types of leaders who came to power between the 1960s and the current decade. Leaders are older, more educated, have more experience and expertise in fields such as economics and have greater respect for democracy. The career trajectory of leaders has changed over the decades. For example, at present there are more leaders who held prior political positions during their careers than five decades ago.
  - Leaders who first came to power during the 21st century are on average 12 years older when they took office than leaders who first came to power during the 1960s.

- Since the 1960s leaders have become more educated. During the 1960s, 36.5% of leaders who came to power during that decade held an undergraduate degree or higher. This percentage has gradually increased over the decades, where 68.7% of leaders who first came to power during the 21st century hold an undergraduate degree or higher.
- The most popular fields of study of leaders have been Law, Economics, and Social Sciences, followed by Education. Social Sciences have seen a decline since independence where study in the field of Law has remained consistent and study in the field of Economics has seen an increase over the past two decades.
- From the 1960s to the present decade the percentage of leaders who, prior to becoming head of state, had held full-time positions in politics (such as ministers or members of legislature) has gradually increased from 65% to 89%.
- During the 1990s and the present decade, there were leaders who held positions in the international civil service (such as UN agencies or the World Bank). Leaders who first came to power before those two decades, never held any such positions.
- Teaching has been a common profession for many of the leaders in all decades. This was most marked during the 1960s when almost a third of all leaders had been teachers at some point during their careers. This tendency, although

not as strong as during the 1960s, has continued until the present decade. During the 1990s onwards, it is noticeable that several leaders have been university teachers at some point before coming to power:

- Of all the leaders studied, 23% have at some point during their career been arrested, detained, imprisoned or placed under house arrest. In addition, 22% of these leaders spent time in exile (forced or voluntary) at some point before coming to power.
2. There is a significant difference in the biographical profiles of civilian, personal and military rulers – a distinction that is highlighted throughout the paper. The profiles of civilian rulers (rulers who were not in the military at the time of taking power and who respected their term limits) and personal rulers (leaders who did not respect term limits, who ruled by decree and / or had autocratic tendencies) differ:
- Personal rulers tend to be just as educated, or even slightly more educated, as their civilian counterparts (with military rulers falling dismally behind).
  - Civilian rulers' most common fields of study have been Law and Economics, where personal rulers' most common fields of study have been Social Sciences and Law.
  - Personal rulers are on average 11 years younger than civilian rulers when they first came to power.
3. Today, more leaders respect presidential terms limits, spend less time in power and adhere to democratic practices.
- Leaders from the 1960s spent an average of 15 years in power, where their counterparts who first came to power during the 1990s, spent an average of 7 years in power.
  - The number of times leaders were voted out of office has increased since the 1960s, showing that democracy in Africa is strengthening.
  - The number of leaders who spent non-consecutive terms in office has decreased, signalling fewer interruptions (such as coups, arrest or exile) while in power.
  - The number of occurrences when leaders lost power through peaceful means increased considerably over the five decades, whereas the number of occurrences when leaders lost power through violent means has decreased at a similar rate.

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