

Populism, Sanctions and Sovereignty: The Case of Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth

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Abstract

This study examines Zimbabwe's 2003 withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Nations under Robert Mugabe as an empirical case of populist engagement with international institutions. Mugabe's rhetoric and actions reveal how populist figures employ anti-imperialist and nationalist narratives to challenge global organizations and reinforce domestic authority. Building on theories of populist strategies toward international institutions, the study argues that Mugabe portrayed the Commonwealth as a neo-colonial entity undermining Zimbabwe's sovereignty, using this framing to justify non-compliance with human rights and democratic norms. Situating Zimbabwe's withdrawal within broader populist agendas, it compares Mugabe's approach to other leaders who resisted external interference to strengthen domestic legitimacy. Using Pacciardi, Spandler, and Söderbaum's framework, which identifies four types of populist disengagement, criticism, extortion, obstruction, and exit, the research locates Zimbabwe's withdrawal within this spectrum. Mugabe's policy evolved from vocal criticism, depicting the Commonwealth as neo-colonial, to exit, the most radical disengagement form. His rhetoric delegitimized sanctions as imperialist interference, consolidating an international populist narrative. By framing global

condemnation as an attack on sovereignty and land reform, Mugabe aligned anti-institutional rhetoric with a rejection of external governance. This episode illustrates how populist leaders escalate from dissent to full disengagement, raising questions about the implications for institutional stability and global governance.

Keywords: *populist disengagement, Commonwealth of Nations exit, Neo-colonialism, sovereignty assertion, international organisations*

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Introduction

Within the volatile environment of early 21st-century international relations, President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth of Nations in 2003 continues to exemplify a pivotal illustration of confrontation between populist disengagement strategies and international organisational authority within the broader framework of international governance. This incident, defined by a strong renunciation of democratic principles enforced from outside, provides a revealing example of how populist leaderships capitalise on nationalist, anti-imperial and anti-colonial discourses to reshape territorial sovereignty and undermine the legitimacy of international organisations.

On an evening that captured the attention of the international community, President Mugabe announced Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth of Nations, asserting that 'we are leaving the Commonwealth, it is a club of racists that punishes us' (Truscott 2003; Compagnon 2011). This course of action was taken in response to an escalating diplomatic impasse over prolonged international sanctions imposed due to the Mugabe regime's alleged electoral misconduct and human rights violations. President Mugabe's proclamation, asserting that any concession to the Commonwealth would reinforce Zimbabwe's subjugation, was not merely a rejection of the organisation's legitimacy but also a deliberate discursive strategy. By refusing overtures for compromise from the political leadership of South Africa, Nigeria and Jamaica, Mugabe's political stance underscored a broader narrative that continued membership would render Zimbabwe a lasting target of what he pejoratively labeled the 'Anglo-Saxon unholy alliance' (Henshaw 2007).

The exit should be interpreted within the broader context of global initiatives to safeguard democratic values and fundamental rights, alongside growing scepticism toward international organisational authority. In the aftermath of Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth in March 2002 – a measure triggered by mounting evidence of electoral malpractice and political repression – the country became the focal point of a heated controversy over the fairness

and impartiality of international sanctions (Duxbury 2004). President Mugabe's subsequent response was not an unresisting concession to foreign oversight but a strategic restructuring of the political narrative. By portraying the Commonwealth as a tool of neo-colonialism that undermined Zimbabwe's national sovereignty, Mugabe advanced a discourse that resonated deeply with domestic audiences and legitimised his confrontational policies (Bush & Szeftel 2002).

This research adopts Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's analytical framework, which distinguishes four main types of disengagement strategies employed by populist governments against international organisations – criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit – to examine the trajectory of Zimbabwe's withdrawal (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). This analytical model draws particularly from Albert Hirschman's concepts of loyalty, voice and exit (Hirschman 1970). At the outset, President Mugabe's outspoken condemnation of the Commonwealth functioned as a vehicle for political criticism, expressing dissatisfaction with the functioning, organisational framework or normative orientation of an international organisation (Spandler & Söderbaum 2023). It could be argued that criticism, as a form of disengagement strategy, was intended to mobilise nationalist fervour in opposition to alleged neocolonial or imperialist intervention. Nevertheless, this criticism rapidly evolved into 'exit', the most extreme form of disengagement, through which Zimbabwe severed its formal ties with the international organisation. By taking this action, President Mugabe not only repudiated foreign supervision but also reaffirmed his administration's independence, thereby strengthening internal authority by advancing a discourse critical of international organisations and their legitimacy.

Media reports from the time comprehensively capture the striking dimensions of this populist disengagement. Accounts highlighted how Mugabe's unwavering rejection of diplomatic concessions reinforced his conviction that even a moderated stance would sustain Zimbabwe's subordinate status within the Commonwealth (Taylor 2005). These assertions, juxtaposed with diplomatic negotiations by foreign dignitaries – including efforts by South African leaders and the diplomatic appeals of Western representatives – underscore the profound discord between international demands for democratic transformation and the populist imperatives shaping Mugabe's policies (Petrica 2021). This bifurcation not only illustrates the power of populist rhetoric in challenging global consensus but also sustains ongoing debate on the effectiveness of international sanctions and collective pressure in influencing populist governance.

Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth provides valuable perspectives on the wider mechanisms of international governance in a period defined by the resurgence of populism. It necessitates a reconsideration of how international organisations can strategically engage with state actors that employ populist approaches to deflect international critique. Furthermore, the development exposes

a paradox intrinsic to modern international relations: the greater the efforts by international organisations to uphold international norms, the greater the risk of antagonising administrations that perceive these actions as infringements on their sovereignty. Hence, this research not only advances our comprehension of populist (dis)engagement with international organisations but also challenges established beliefs regarding the resilience and adaptability of international organisational structures amid the growing trend of populism.

In the subsequent sections, this paper will initially outline the conceptual foundations of populist discourse and its application in international relations, building upon Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's criticism-extortion-obstruction-exit analytical framework. The following sections will present a comprehensive empirical examination of Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth, placing this event within the context of both historical and current discussions on international legitimacy and sovereignty. Through the integration of media reports and rigorous theoretical scrutiny, the research intends to contribute a refined understanding of how populist governments maneuver and, in some instances, disrupt the principles of international governance. Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth functions as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle between populist sentiments and global institutionalism, a struggle that continues to define the dynamics of international relations in impactful and uncertain ways.

A critical assessment of the theoretical framework

Although definitional accuracy and terminological agreement remain conceptually divergent within scholarly circles, established theoretical perspectives on populism reflect commonality in at least two key aspects: the people and the elite (Canovan 1981). Expressed differently, populism constructs a narrative around the opposition between the people and the elite. This political discourse framework has been synthesised precisely as 'the people against the powerful elite' (Judis & Teixeira 2002). Further extrapolating this divide to the field of international relations would help elucidate the nature of the relationship between populist leaders, who claim to represent the will of the people, and international organisations, which are regarded as the institutionalised establishment predominantly serving the interests of the global elite.

Populism can be defined as a conceptual paradigm that frames society as being divided into two ideologically opposed and internally cohesive factions: the virtuous populace against the immoral elites. It further advances the claim that politics ought to reflect the shared interests and collective identity of the populace (Mudde 2004: 543). According to this conceptualisation, populism is antithetical to two specific perspectives: pluralism and elitism. Elitism posits that political decision-making should be guided by the principles of a morally superior elite, as opposed to the ethically uninformed populace. Pluralism challenges the rigid

dichotomy presented by both elitism and populism, interpreting society as an intricate configuration of collective and individual identities with frequently opposing ideological stances and interests (Mudde 2004: 544).

Populism emphasises ethical dichotomies rather than detailed governance strategies and processes. A defining feature of the populist narrative is the moral-political bifurcation between the people and the elite, rather than a research-based distinction in behavioural tendencies or perspectives. Populist discourse proceeds by means of rhetorical oversimplification, depicting political life as a binary moral struggle that denies multidimensionality and analytical nuance (Patricia 2017). This communicative paradigm reconstructs the plurality of politics into an ethical confrontation between sanctity and corruption, thus positioning compromise and reconciliation as morally tainted acts. According to the populist understanding, public discourse is structured around an antagonistic divide between allies and adversaries. Political adversaries are depicted as more than just individuals with conflicting viewpoints and principles; they are framed as unethical and morally corrupt. As a result, reconciliation remains unattainable, as it undermines the perceived purity (Mudde 2004: 544). Within this research, populism is conceived as a rhetorical and strategic mechanism by which political leaders delineate a moral dichotomy between the righteous, self-determining people and the depraved, alien elite. Drawing upon Mudde's (2004) ideational conception and Roberts-Miller's (2017) rhetorical interpretation, populism is understood here as more than a mere ideology, it functions as a discursive style that legitimises dissent against established institutional orders. In the global context, this tendency manifests as a sovereigntist strategy that resists institutional constraint, framing transnational governance architectures as impediments to the self-determination of the people. This working definition informs the examination of the ways in which Mugabe's discourse reconfigured Zimbabwe's positionality within the Commonwealth via incremental stages of populist estrangement.

The paradoxical disengagement strategies of populist political leaderships stem from the conflicting motivations fostered by this ideological framing and narrative construction with respect to international organisations. Adopting a defiant and status quo-challenging stance in international relations can enhance the legitimacy of the uncompromising and anti-establishment depiction of populists as embodiments of the popular will, in opposition to the deceitful global elite (Oliver & Rahn 2016). Disengagement from globally recognised international organisations can serve as an expression of loyalty to this stance for national constituencies, notably as the influence of these organisations is commonly constructed around a perception of bureaucratic neutrality and depoliticisation, which contributes to populism's portrayal of the establishment as disconnected from the general populace (Hindess & Sawyer 2004). According to this populist interpretation, an accommodative posture in global organisations could be criticised as a retreat from the populist agenda.

Diverging from the incentive previously noted, populist political leaderships are strategically offered both concrete and abstract inducements that shape their disengagement process from organisations and frame their decision-making in terms of practical considerations within international organisations. Balancing complete disengagement with strategic participation creates the conditions for continued leverage of international platforms for symbolic recognition and international influence projection. Domestic structural barriers, including widespread public sentiment and the policy inclinations of key institutional gatekeepers, can alleviate the consequences of disengagement. In addition to domestic factors, the relevant international body and its key participants may influence the populist leadership's policy orientation by yielding certain demands, including compensations or organisational restructuring, which expand the populist administration's control over decision-making. As a result of these moderating influences, total withdrawal is anticipated solely in extraordinary cases (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2028).

To scrutinise how populist political leaderships maneuver through these complexities, Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum have formulated a theoretical model that provides a framework for understanding the methods by which populists engage in varying forms of disengagement. The authors who developed this model conceptualise disengagement as policies enacted by populist political leaderships that manifest a withdrawal from entrenched patterns of cooperative frameworks. These policy measures may deviate from the formal obligations of the relevant state actor arising from its membership. They can also erode the trust underpinning cooperative engagements that form the structural principles of an international organisation. According to this theoretical model, exit is merely one modality within the broader phenomenon of disengagement. A notable shortcoming of this theoretical perspective is that it seeks to clarify the mechanisms underlying these practices through which populist political actors strategically contest global governance structures. It could be argued that this model largely neglects the practice of exit, as it explicitly recognises that populist foreign policy strategies frequently advocate for international cooperation (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029).

According to this model, criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit constitute four essential classifications of practices that populist administrations can leverage to disengage from global organisations. Official declarations that express dissatisfaction with the operational processes, organisational blueprint or value-based perspective of an international organisation are regarded as criticism. Spandler and Söderbaum's study, based on analyses of speeches by Viktor Orbán, Hugo Chávez and Rodrigo Duterte, demonstrated how these leaders delegitimised certain international organisations by criticising them on the grounds of representation, authority, interests, institutional structures and their normative

standing in the international arena (Spandler & Söderbaum 2023). The practice of criticism may seek to alter the policy frameworks of organisations, demand structural changes within them or weaken the organisation's credibility as a whole. Although it might be the most viable and safe choice in the short term, it could also serve as a first step in a more radical process that drastically challenges the relevant international organisation in the long term.

Extortion, defined as financial or diplomatic coercion within a global organisation, is conjoined with subtle or formal requirements for policy modifications, governance structure reform or burden-sharing. Through this form of disengagement, populist political leaderships can openly express their dissent against an international organisation while concurrently indicating their willingness to maintain collaboration under revised conditions. If the relevant international organisation accommodates through concessions, the populist leadership can maximise the material returns associated with its participation in the organisation (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029).

A key limitation or shortcoming concerning this understanding of extortion is that it is based on the premise of a rational and deliberate logic underlying extortion, without comprehensively considering the possible unforeseen ramifications or far-reaching systemic consequences of these measures. While this analytical framework suggests that extortion functions chiefly as a strategic instrument for extracting concessions while ensuring continued partnership, in practice, extortion can result in sustained reputational harm, erosion of legitimacy or weakening of mutual trust among member nations, complicating prospects for future collaboration. The presumption that international organisations are expected to accommodate demands as a reaction to extortion underestimates the probability that they may oppose coercion, enforce retaliatory measures or restrict the extorting party's influence in organisational decisions. Some international organisations may prioritise maintaining established norms and regulations instead of legitimising coercive strategies. The success of extortion strategies is contingent upon the comparative strength of the populist member within the international organisation. Marginalised or less significant countries may lack the strategic leverage to make a credible threat of discontinuing participation or cutting funds, restricting the effectiveness of this approach across a range of cases. Although this interpretation implies that populist administrations resort to extortion as a method to negotiate more advantageous conditions, it fails to account for cases where populist leaderships could leverage extortion as a strategic tool for internal political advantages, utilising it to strengthen anti-globalist discourse rather than striving for authentic organisational transformation. The notion that extortion makes ongoing cooperation possible overlooks the possibility that the recurrent or disproportionate application of this tactic could undermine organisational stability,

stimulate like-minded behaviour from other nations or foster fragmentation within the organisational framework.

Obstruction is the third type of disengagement behaviour employed by populist leaderships, according to this analytical model, which aims at impairing the functionality of an international organisation at the level of implementation. It may encompass obstruction of decision-making processes, infringement of policies or obligations, and lack of participation in meetings. Through obstruction, populist administrations exhibit overt resistance to an international organisation's policies. Obstruction may focus on specific elements of the cooperative framework. By opting not to withdraw, future re-engagement in full participation is left as an option (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029–2030).

This typology downplays the possible long-term effects of obstruction not only on the populist administration's relationship with the international organisation but also on the organisation's overall efficiency. The model indicates that obstruction could serve as a short-term strategy with the prospect of re-engaging in full participation in the long term. That being said, continued obstruction can harm a member state's reputation, deteriorate trust with other nations in the organisation and result in permanent removal from key decision-making procedures, constraining future opportunities for engagement. The idea that obstruction is directed at specific elements of the cooperative framework underestimates the potential for reciprocal measures from the international organisation. Other countries within the organisation may retaliate by curtailing engagement, halting collaboration or imposing international sanctions, which can heighten tensions and complicate future reconciliation. It also conveys that obstruction could be managed by the international organisation and suggests that obstruction does not directly lead to systemic disintegration. However, persistent obstruction from various state parties, particularly in essential decision-making processes, could diminish the international organisation's overall operational effectiveness, potentially sparking organisational disintegration or fragmentation, which could jeopardise the international organisation's fundamental objectives. Additionally, it maintains that obstruction is exclusively an international, tactical maneuver. On the contrary, populist administrations may be motivated by internal political considerations, including mobilising anti-globalist or nationalist sentiments, instead of focusing exclusively on practical benefits from international organisations. In this particular scenario, obstruction might be more concerned with signaling dissent for the sake of political gain rather than focusing on implementing tangible policy adjustments within international organisations. The assertion does not comprehensively address the likelihood that international organisations may evolve in response to obstruction through policy modifications, establishing alternative frameworks or moving toward more adaptable decision-making structures. Under such conditions, the populist administration may suffer from

diminishing returns from obstruction if the international organisation is capable of maintaining operations notwithstanding the disruption.

According to Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's (2024) analytical model, exit is defined as complete disengagement or cessation of active involvement with an international organisation. While, in particular scenarios, a withdrawal decision may be annulled before it is fully enacted, exit constitutes the most drastic disengagement approach. The exit choice is occasionally associated with the emergence of new international bodies or the development of competing organisations (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2030).

This conceptualisation points out that exit can be readily undone, conditioned by organisational membership policies, but it does not elaborate on the specific requirements for withdrawal or provide real-world examples. Some international organisations, including the European Union, are governed by sophisticated and legally obligatory exit processes that complicate efforts to regain membership. While the definition above characterises exit as a simple and direct action, it does not take into account the likelihood that exit can occur incrementally, through negotiation or in a limited form, such as gradual disengagement or partial withdrawal. Member states may withdraw from particular organisational frameworks without entirely ceasing organisational engagement. It also omits recognition of the fact that exit may entail significant diplomatic, political and economic repercussions, frequently complicating the possibility of reversal despite being legally permissible. As exemplified by the Brexit process, exit can be significantly more intricate than merely withdrawing and later re-entering. Moreover, it suggests that exit is occasionally followed by the establishment of new international organisations, yet it does not investigate specific cases where exit results in geopolitical isolation and strategic detachment instead of building alternative cooperative frameworks in the international arena. Exiting an international organisation does not always prompt the development of new international governance frameworks; certain states may downsize their role and restrain their approach to international cooperation without an alternative framework. While it defines exit within the scope of procedural mechanisms, it neglects to explore the motivations underlying it. Populist administrations, for example, could use exit as a means of symbolic expression instead of a sincere attempt to establish new international organisations. The absence of analysis on economic, ideological or political catalysts renders the conceptual framework partially underdeveloped.

According to the analytical model developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024), it is feasible to comprehend these separate practices as a cohesive trajectory from discursive to concrete disengagement. Populist political leaderships may progressively escalate their challenges. This analytical model does not consider intensifying disengagement toward complete exit as the most effective approach. This is because, although full exit would amplify the perceived

legitimacy of the populist administration's radical stance, it would also entail relinquishing both symbolic and tangible advantages of sustained association with international organisations. Due to these considerations, their analytical model largely assumes that populist leaderships frequently integrate various strategies from the strategic arsenal of disengagement or transition among them to appease domestic constituencies who expect affirmation of the populist leadership's extremist anti-elite stance. At the same time, the same populist government strategically capitalises on the advantages of international partnerships due to its membership in international organisations. From this analytical model's perspective, a discernible distinction exists between populist and liberal leaderships. While populist leaderships are inclined to employ the entire spectrum of disengagement strategies in a more publicly visible manner, for liberal leaderships, rigorous adherence to international cooperation holds strategic significance (Paciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2030).

Conceivably, the presented analytical framework offers a nuanced understanding of how populist leaderships adjust their strategic alignment with international organisations. Its analytical robustness stems from conceptualising disengagement as an evolving continuum instead of a dichotomous decision. This spectrum extends from solely discursive confrontations to concrete and measurable withdrawal. By putting forward the idea that populist governments tend to implement a blended yet inconsistent strategy, swinging between an anti-organisational narrative and realistic partnership, the model emphasises the intricacy of populist foreign policy strategies.

The concept of a continuum, ranging from discursive criticism to complete exit, reflects the evolving nature of administrative approaches. This framework allows for a more sophisticated evaluation than a rigid dualistic classification of engaged versus disengaged. The analytical model successfully illustrates the competing considerations that populist regimes confront. By avoiding complete withdrawal, these governments retain the integrity of their anti-establishment image while continuing to leverage the financial and symbolic advantages of their membership in international organisations. This dichotomy is fundamental to grasping the adaptability of populist approaches toward international organisations. It establishes a clear differentiation between populist and non-populist administrations. The framework posits that while both have the capacity to apply similar strategies, the driving forces underpinning populist movements encourage a more transparent and adaptable application of these strategies. This comparative aspect offers a constructive methodological foundation for future research grounded in empirical data.

While the analytical framework offers a valuable perspective for assessing populist disengagement strategies, its effectiveness is tempered by inherent constraints. The deficiency in definitional precision might undermine the clarity of

the evaluation or the application of empirical methodologies to assess the framework. For instance, the analytical distinction between symbolic advantages and material benefits may exhibit considerable divergence in different circumstances. The assertion that populist leaderships utilise the entire spectrum of strategies in a more transparent and versatile manner risks oversimplification. This pattern may not apply universally to all populist regimes, and the multifaceted nature of populist movements may indicate that the framework fails to account for significant variations. Although the framework proposes that the motivational frameworks of populism contribute to the implementation of this dual approach, it does not comprehensively analyse the particular processes or circumstances in which administrations opt to transition between practices. Further explanation of the causal reasoning would support the argument more effectively and present more straightforward avenues for empirical corroboration. Additionally, the limited number of studies concerning this phenomenon might limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised. The fluctuating dynamics of international relations and internal pressures across various regions could give rise to exceptions that are inadequately addressed by a one-dimensional continuum approach. It is also important to note that the analysis is essentially static in that it delivers a momentary depiction of strategic actions without fully considering the progression of these practices or their reaction to foreign upheavals. A more nuanced analysis could contemplate the way long-term patterns and abrupt international changes determine the relationship between cooperation and disengagement.

Case study: Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth

Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth in 2003 symbolises a complex, phased strategy through which populist political leadership can reformulate or terminate its (dis)engagement with international organisations. The Zimbabwean episode, unfolding within the context of a broader international controversy concerning democratic governance, civil liberties and the legitimacy of international norms, illustrates how a populist leader can reframe external critiques into a compelling discourse on national independence and resistance to alleged neo-colonial intervention. This case is anchored around President Robert Mugabe, whose deliberate articulation of an anti-imperialist and nationalist narrative not only reshaped Zimbabwe's engagement with the Commonwealth but also bolstered his international political authority (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). As expressed in official documents, notably the Charter of the Commonwealth, the institution defines itself as a voluntary association of autonomous and equal polities unified by shared normative principles of democracy, developmental cooperation and human rights (Commonwealth 2012). However, this institutional self-portrayal obscures the latent contradictions between the Commonwealth's decolonial aspirations and its historical entanglement with imperial hierarchies. The Commonwealth's norma-

tive ethos, anchored in discourses of good governance and virtuous leadership, has been widely interpreted as reproducing paternalistic hierarchies under the guise of cooperative equality (Murphy 2018). Yet, Mugabe's framing of the Commonwealth as a perpetuation of imperial authority, a neo-colonial mechanism sustaining external normative control and limiting Zimbabwean autonomy, echoed long-established criticisms within scholarly and political arenas. Earlier analyses had framed the institution as reproducing systemic inequalities traceable to its colonial lineage (Power 2009). Through the adoption and intensification of this discourse, Mugabe rearticulated inherited postcolonial tropes of dependency, transforming the Commonwealth's professed image of consensual cooperation into a symbol of imperial excess and moral inconsistency.

Informed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's conceptual model, this section traces the chronological unfolding of Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, from early verbal contestation to final departure, revealing how populist agency can convert discursive resistance into organisational exit (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). In the early stages, President Mugabe expressed criticism, employing public condemnations that challenged the foundational norms and governance structures of the Commonwealth (Phimister & Raftopoulos 2004). Mugabe's discursive strategy sought to undermine the organisation's credibility by framing its international sanctions and democratic principles as mechanisms of foreign domination, thereby paving the way for further disengagement. The subsequent stage – extortion – though less explicitly documented in empirical evidence, was implicitly woven into the leadership's request for a fundamental reconceptualisation of Zimbabwe's ties with the Commonwealth. By employing covert pressure, wherein any form of agreement was perceived as perpetuating external domination, Mugabe asserted that alignment with Commonwealth principles was unfeasible, thereby pressuring the organisation to either comply with his conditions or face full disengagement (Amnesty International 2003).

In the next phase, the strategy evolved into obstruction. Instead of abruptly terminating relations, Zimbabwe's leadership pursued strategies that deliberately hindered the functional effectiveness of the Commonwealth. This encompassed a refusal to adhere to policy prescriptions, intentional obstruction of decision-making procedures during key deliberations, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), and a broader rejection of meaningful engagement with the organisation (International Crisis Group 2004). This stage emphasised a dual-purpose strategy: to manifest open resistance to external intervention while concurrently maintaining the possibility of future engagement under conditions more aligned with Zimbabwe's sovereign interests. These stages eventually resulted in the exit phase: the categorical and permanent disengagement from the Commonwealth. In December 2003, after a prolonged diplomatic

stalemate and escalating domestic pressures, Zimbabwe officially withdrew from membership (Adelmann 2004). This concluding action was more than a procedural formality; it was a symbolic repudiation of foreign oversight over its domestic affairs, bolstering President Mugabe's discourse on national autonomy and resistance to imperial domination.

Empirical data from the Zimbabwean case emphasises this phased approach. The preliminary suspension of Zimbabwe after the 2002 presidential election, characterised by widespread accusations of electoral malpractice and human rights violations, triggered a sequence of contentious engagements across regional and global domains (Howard-Hassmann 2010). The Commonwealth's commitment to maintaining its human rights and democracy standards, articulated in the Harare Declaration, which reaffirms members' 'commitment to democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances', and to 'fundamental human rights and the rule of law' (The Commonwealth 1991), provided the organisational justification for intervention. President Mugabe reframed these normative commitments as tools of neo-imperial encroachment, claiming that the Commonwealth's appeal to democracy and human rights functioned as a discursive strategy for 'Anglo-Saxon' domination over Zimbabwe's sovereignty.

Diplomatic negotiations, particularly during the CHOGM and as part of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), clearly demonstrate how Zimbabwe's populist leadership maneuvered through these contentious issues by transitioning from rhetorical condemnation to tangible disengagement. Mugabe's exit from the Commonwealth provides a quintessential example of how populist administrations may implement a calculated, multi-stage approach, progressing from criticism to extortion and obstruction, ultimately leading to exit, in order to contest and reshape their relationship with international organisations. This case enhances scholarly comprehension of the dynamics of populist disengagement and provokes critical inquiries into the resilience of international governance structures in light of such profound shifts in internationally accepted norms, rules, values, principles and sovereignty.

The preliminary stage of Zimbabwe's disengagement from the Commonwealth is best interpreted through the lens of criticism, a stage characterised by the explicit and public denunciation of the organisation's authority and functional frameworks (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029). During this stage, President Mugabe advanced a compelling discourse that reconceptualised the Commonwealth not as an autonomous union of independent nations committed to democratic governance and socio-economic progress but as a vestige of post-colonial control (Phimister & Raftopoulos 2004). In his public statements, Mugabe declared that 'the Commonwealth is being used by a few countries, the Anglo-Saxon bloc, as a weapon to oppress and punish those of us who have refused to be their colonies again' (White 2003). By conceptualising the organisation as

a post-colonial apparatus, Mugabe argued that the international sanctions and mandated policy directives imposed on his country were not primarily intended to uphold common democratic principles but were instead designed to maintain external dominance over the nation's internal governance.

In his State of the Nation Address (President Mugabe's State of the Nation address 2002), Mugabe denounced 'Britain's relentless diplomatic campaign of vilifying and isolating our country', asserting that Zimbabwe remained 'guided by principles of mutual respect and unbending regard for the sovereign will of independent nations'. Likewise, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Mugabe 2002), he rejected 'manipulative and intimidatory attempts by some countries and regional bloc bent on subordinating our sovereignty to their hegemonic ambitions and imperial interests, falsely presented as matters of rule of law, democracy and good governance'. These declarations clearly illustrate the manner in which Mugabe transformed the Commonwealth's normative appeal to democracy and human rights into a rhetorical indictment of neo-imperial domination. His discourse subverted the moral ordering embedded within global governance structures. Instead of portraying Zimbabwe as the violator of democratic principles, Mugabe's rhetoric recast it as the aggrieved party suffering from 'Anglo-Saxon' hypocrisy. By declaring that 'we have fought for our land, we have fought for our sovereignty, small as we are' (Mugabe 2002), Mugabe cast defiance itself as patriotic virtue and resistance to external pressure as moral necessity. This discursive construction simultaneously delegitimised the Commonwealth's authority and mobilised nationalist sentiment by recasting Zimbabwe's global marginalisation as part of an enduring struggle against colonial domination.

President Mugabe's discourse throughout this phase was characterised by fervent public declarations that framed international criticism as an attack on sovereign dignity and independence (CNN 2003). Mugabe's criticisms were deliberately symbolic and largely declarative; they did not necessitate urgent organisational reforms or governance restructuring. Nevertheless, they proved tactically impactful in strengthening internal backing (Simmons 2017). This strategy enabled his government to channel popular discontent and patriotic fervour without the need for abrupt, sweeping policy changes. President Mugabe's initial criticisms functioned as a catalyst for mobilisation, serving as a means to rally mass support by portraying the Commonwealth's requirements as neo-colonial encroachments rather than genuine demands for reform.

This enduring discourse of anti-colonialism gained significant traction among a population disenchanted by longstanding grievances and ongoing political conflicts. By highlighting the idea that his country's independence was being undermined by an organisation rooted in colonial histories, President Mugabe succeeded in redefining international sanctions as an act of foreign hostility (Minillo 2020). His discourse not only discredited the Commonwealth's involvement,

including its emphasis on compliance with democratic norms embedded in the Harare Declaration (Srinivasan 2009), but also framed Zimbabwe's leadership as the ultimate authority over national affairs, resolutely resisting what he criticised as a discriminatory and neo-imperialist structure.

The criticism stage paved the way for progressive phases of disengagement. It created a distinction between foreign, supposedly imperial powers and a unified, structured conception of sovereign independence. This discursive approach was essential: It set the stage for subsequent phases of extortion, obstruction and eventual exit. The explicit criticism of the Commonwealth's policies was not a singular eruption of dissent but an intentional, strategic effort to erode the organisation's legitimacy and prepare the domestic populace for the inevitability of complete withdrawal. By reinterpreting the Commonwealth's measures as a violation of Zimbabwe's sovereignty and national dignity, Mugabe's leadership effectively formulated a persuasive argument for withdrawal – one that resonated beyond the local public and with ideologically aligned populist movements internationally.

After the preliminary stage of public criticism, the extortion stage emerges as a pivotal turning point in the disengagement process, where a nation capitalises on its strategic standing to extract compromises or redefine the parameters of engagement with an international organisation. Regarding Zimbabwe's engagement with the Commonwealth, although there is minimal evidence of explicit monetary or resource-driven extortion, the process is clearly exemplified through high-stakes diplomacy and the enforcement of rigid demands.

President Mugabe's government, building on the initial phase of criticism, redefined the Commonwealth's mandates as both unfair and an unacceptable violation of Zimbabwe's national sovereignty. His articulation of sovereignty embodied a distinctly anti-colonial interpretation, one grounded less in formal statehood than in the ongoing pursuit of self-determination and liberation from imperial hierarchies (Grovogui 1996; Anghie 2007). Within this interpretive frame, sovereignty was construed as the moral authority of decolonised states to oppose external interventions legitimised through the discourse of universal democratic and governance standards. By refusing to negotiate in any capacity that could enable Zimbabwe to retain its membership, his administration leveraged the possibility of withdrawal from all avenues of meaningful dialogue (Bush & Szeftel 2002). This stance was not primarily driven by the pursuit of material gains but was more focused on employing the threat of total disengagement as a bargaining tool. By taking this approach, Zimbabwe subtly indicated that ongoing participation in the organisation, even with adjusted terms, would perpetuate its subjugation by an organisation it considered fundamentally biased and neo-colonial.

This tactical stance was especially apparent throughout the diplomatic negotiations within the Troika, an entity consisting of prominent Commonwealth countries, including South Africa, Australia and Nigeria, and at the Commonwealth

Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) (Namusoke 2015). In these meetings, Zimbabwean officials asserted that any effort to enforce limited measures, or to pursue a settlement that did not achieve complete reinstatement, would merely prolong Zimbabwe's subjugation (Namusoke 2015). By maintaining that only the absolute lifting of international sanctions and a clear, definitive reinstatement could reestablish genuine sovereign equality, President Mugabe's government reclaimed authority over the discourse surrounding Zimbabwe's international relations.

Zimbabwe's strategy in these diplomatic talks can be viewed as a form of diplomatic extortion, where the prospect of withdrawal served as a powerful negotiation tool. The government's implicit expectations were designed to pressure the Commonwealth into reevaluating its approach by laying down an absolute requirement: Either accept Zimbabwe's conditions or risk an unprecedented rupture with a member country. This rigid position not only disrupted standard diplomatic procedures but also exposed cracks in the Commonwealth's diplomatic framework. The fractures among key actors, evidenced by divergent stances within the Troika and the heated discussions at CHOGM, underscore the extent to which Zimbabwe's coercive strategies strained the organisation's capacity for consensus-based international governance (Taylor 2005).

Findings from this era further highlight the effectiveness of Zimbabwe's approach. Senior diplomatic exchanges demonstrated that political figures from countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, who expressed political and regional alignment with Zimbabwe's concerns, became entangled in a multifaceted situation in which Zimbabwe's ultimatum of full withdrawal compelled them to reevaluate their stances within the organisational framework (Lee, Taylor & Williams 2006). These diplomatic negotiations, although not characterised by explicit economic pressure, ultimately served as a strategic maneuver: By rejecting any settlement that suggested continued subordination, Zimbabwe used the prospect of withdrawal to challenge the Commonwealth's authority and legitimacy (Myburgh 2008).

President Mugabe's extortion stage demonstrates how a populist government can instrumentalise the threat of withdrawal, not merely as rhetorical posturing but as a deliberate strategy to recalibrate international political dynamics. At the December 2003 Abuja CHOGM, Zimbabwe's delegation, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Stan Mudenga, cautioned that the nation 'would not accept conditionalities for readmission', emphasising its stance as 'an equal member or not there at all' (Mudenga 2003). In the aftermath of the summit, Mugabe reaffirmed his position, characterising the Commonwealth as an instrument of racial oppression and neo-colonial domination declaring that Zimbabwe would not re-enter an organisation that treated it as a subordinate colony (Dowden & Burleigh 2003). These statements functioned as an unspoken ultimatum, demand-

ing comprehensive reinstatement grounded in sovereign equality, failing which, complete withdrawal would ensue. The confrontation exposed the structural tension between the Commonwealth's rhetorical adherence to democratic governance and its inability to operationalise these principles when challenged by defiance. The episode unmasked the tenuous foundation of the Commonwealth's moral authority, exposing the contradiction between its liberal-democratic ethos and the sovereignty claims of postcolonial nations (Duxbury 2004). In Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's (2024) analytical schema, this stage represents a critical threshold between discursive opposition and institutional rupture, illustrating the populist capacity to instrumentalise systemic inconsistencies as justification for withdrawal.

Within the framework proposed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024), Zimbabwe's behaviour during this phase can be interpreted as aligning with an extortionary strategy. From this perspective, the administration's resource to diplomatic ultimatums and uncompromising positions served as a mechanism to utilise the prospect of withdrawal as bargaining power in redefining its relationship with the Commonwealth. This reading not only illuminates the ways in which Mugabe's government reaffirmed its sovereignty-centred rhetoric but also demonstrates how these maneuvers may exacerbate global scepticism toward the perceived neutrality and credibility of international institutions in addressing populist actors. The calculated deployment of diplomatic ultimatums highlights the wider consequences for international governance, in which the threat of withdrawal directly questions the core principles that form the foundation of international standards.

Following the failure of Zimbabwe's extortionary tactics to secure favourable concessions from the Commonwealth, the government's approach evolved into the next phase of disengagement – obstruction. The tertiary stage of obstruction encompasses measures that hinder the normal operations and governance processes of an international organisation without formally severing membership ties (Pacciardi, Spandler, & Söderbaum 2024: 2029–2030). In the context of Zimbabwe under Mugabe's leadership, obstruction became a pivotal strategic move that enabled his government to disrupt the Commonwealth's organisational structure while retaining the formal option for potential re-engagement.

In the aftermath of its suspension, Zimbabwe's tactics were exemplified by a deliberate abstention from meaningful engagement in essential organisational functions. While still nominally a member of the Commonwealth, Mugabe's government deliberately obstructed the institution's initiatives to reestablish standard operational and diplomatic relations (Winchester 2023). This was distinctly observable during the CHOGM as well as in engagements with specialised entities such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). Zimbabwe's sustained defiance, evidenced by its unwillingness to attend meetings, engage in

substantive negotiations and implement suggested measures, severely obstructed the Commonwealth's efforts to facilitate a settlement to the crisis.

Zimbabwe's fracturing ties with the Commonwealth unfolded within a broader context of deepening domestic turmoil, disputed sovereignty and increasing global condemnation of Mugabe's leadership. In the aftermath of the 2000 parliamentary vote and the contentious 2002 presidential election, denounced by Commonwealth monitors for systemic manipulation and voted intimidation, Zimbabwe was suspended from the organisation's councils in accordance with the Harare Declaration. The suspension decision, initiated by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and subsequently endorsed at the 2002 CooNUM CHOgm, exposed entrenched divisions within the Commonwealth membership. Whereas Australia favoured a punitive approach centred on firm sanctions, South Africa and Nigeria advanced a conciliatory strategy emphasising negotiation and dialogue (Taylor 2005).

Amid these tensions, President Mugabe depicted the Commonwealth's intervention as a manifestation of British neo-imperialism, alleging that the organisation sought to penalise Zimbabwe for its land reform initiative while affirming the nation's sovereign right to self-determination (Mugabe 2002). In his public addresses of the time, notably at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Mugabe invoked the rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle and sovereign parity, denouncing 'manipulative and intimidatory attempts by some countries and regional blocs' to impose control over Zimbabwe's domestic affairs. Through the elevation of sovereignty as both a moral principle and a political shield against external pressure, Mugabe rearticulated the diplomatic impasse as a symbolic struggle between the endurance of colonial hierarchies and the assertion of postcolonial autonomy. When the 2003 Abuja CHOgm ended without consensus regarding Zimbabwe's readmission, Mugabe's government interpreted the persistence of its suspension as empirical proof of systemic bias within the institution. Zimbabwe's formal withdrawal from the Commonwealth on 7 December 2003 marked the apex of a diplomatic process shaped by negotiation breakdowns, ideological polarisation and populist invocations of sovereignty and patriotic defiance (Chigora 2007).

Throughout the CHOgm discussions, Zimbabwe's sustained disengagement from diplomatic talks and non-compliance with essential recommendations issued by CMAG not only hindered advancement but also deepened fractures within the Commonwealth (South African Institute of International Affairs 2004). The core architecture of the organisation, which is dependent on collective agreement and engaged involvement, was weakened due to Zimbabwe's strategic disengagement from functional operations. This conduct interfered with the consensus-building process, rendering futile any efforts to achieve a consensual resolution on Zimbabwe's status. The obstruction extended beyond mere procedural non-compliance; it functioned as a deliberate strategy to erode the organisation's legitimacy in en-

forcing its own regulations, thus strengthening the claim that the Commonwealth was inherently prejudiced and unable to provide equitable governance.

From a more comprehensive strategic standpoint, the decision to obstruct instead of opting for immediate withdrawal or concession enabled President Mugabe of Zimbabwe to leverage both national and international political spheres (United Nations 2010). On the national front, the refusal to cooperate resonated with nationalist ideologies and strengthened Mugabe's image as a leader determined not to be controlled by outside forces. On the international stage, it conveyed a clear signal that while Zimbabwe was ready to confront and undermine existing norms, it was not completely ruling out the possibility of future diplomatic engagement, provided that such engagement took place under conditions that honoured its sovereignty and ideological position. This twofold strategy – resisting external control while preserving the option for realignment – was a defining feature of the populist strategy, framing Zimbabwe as a state capable of rejoining the fold when conditions became more favourable.

Zimbabwe's deployment of obstruction within the Commonwealth structure demonstrates a deliberate strategy of operational stagnation. By engaging in practices that disrupted organisational processes without fully disengaging, Mugabe's regime effectively diminished the Commonwealth's authority to uphold its standards and facilitate a resolution to the international crisis. This phase of obstruction amplified the anti-imperialist message central to Zimbabwe's populist narrative and also offered a strategic fallback, maintaining the potential for future diplomatic re-engagement. This approach emphasises the larger consequences for international organisations when confronted with populist governments: the difficulty of preserving operational unity in response to intentional, obstructive disruption that discredits normative oversight and makes reconciliation more challenging.

The exit stage marks the ultimate and most profound phase in the process of disengagement, where longstanding discontent and strategic maneuvering reach their peak, culminating in a conclusive disengagement from an international organisation (Pacciardi, Spandler, & Söderbaum 2024: 2030). In the context of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, this stage took shape in December 2003, during a period of rising domestic political divisions and ongoing external constraints, when the administration led by President Robert Mugabe officially withdrew from the Commonwealth.

This critical decision was not a sudden response but the result of a gradual strategic approach that had developed through preceding phases of criticism, extortion and obstruction. Through his fervent public criticisms, Mugabe repositioned the Commonwealth as a neo-colonial structure, eroding Zimbabwe's sovereign independence. Thereafter, the government's strategic diplomatic maneuvering, in which any concession was perceived as submission, exerted covert pressure on

the organisation through extortion tactics. Ultimately, by consistently resisting cooperation and intentionally obstructing organisational functions, Zimbabwe significantly undermined the effectiveness of the Commonwealth's operations. The cumulative impact of these stages paved the way for the final phase of disengagement: exit.

The decision to withdraw emerged amid intensifying tensions at the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja, which exposed profound divisions among member states concerning Zimbabwe's suspension. The debates laid bare profound internal divisions that underscored the fragility of consensus within the Commonwealth. Australia advocated the maintenance of Zimbabwe's suspension in response to documented electoral irregularities, while South Africa and Nigeria called for its readmission and renewed dialogue. These contentious interactions, coupled with the Troika's incapacity to formulate a cohesive position, underscored the disintegration of collective agreement and institutional confidence (Myburgh 2008). The internal dissonance within the organisation, where Australia's rigid stance collided with African leaders' conciliatory overtures, eroded the Commonwealth's legitimacy in the perception of Zimbabwe's leadership. Amid this escalating crisis, Mugabe's government construed withdrawal as the only defensible course through which to preserve national sovereignty against a prejudiced and externally influenced Commonwealth.

President Mugabe's decision to withdraw transcended a mere administrative procedure; it was a significant symbolic gesture that reverberated across both national and global spheres (Al Jazeera 2003). By opting for withdrawal, his government firmly dismissed the Commonwealth's legitimacy in setting norms, decisively eliminating any prospect of future reintegration within its current structure. This unilaterally executed action exemplified a broader populist approach – one that progressed from outspoken criticism to a calculated departure – aiming to reshape the contours of international legitimacy to prioritise national sovereignty. By outrightly rejecting the Commonwealth's stipulations, Zimbabwe sought to redefine its global stance, emphasising that its future should be determined internally rather than dictated by external arbitration.

The complete withdrawal highlighted the structural constraints of international organisations in influencing populist administrations. The Commonwealth, devoid of binding enforcement powers and weakened by internal divisions, failed to bridge the gap between its democratic values and the governance dynamics of a populist regime that strategically utilised each phase – from criticism to exit – to advance its own objectives (Dowden & Burleigh 2003). Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth not only solidified its anti-colonialist and nationalist rhetoric but also underscored the fragility of international governance structures when challenged by governments prepared to forsake organisational norms and principles in defence of national sovereignty.

Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in December 2003 represents the final phase of a carefully orchestrated, multi-tiered approach that evolved from declaratory criticism and covert extortion to direct obstruction and, ultimately, complete disengagement. This withdrawal represented both a renunciation of an organisation viewed as an instrument of neo-colonial dominance and a reaffirmation of sovereign independence – a decision that recalibrated Zimbabwe's position on the international stage and emphasised the structural limitations of international governance amid the rise of populism.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth showcases how populist leaderships can orchestrate a gradual and calculated disengagement strategy, encompassing criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit, to recalibrate their engagement with international organisations. This trajectory, as illustrated by the Zimbabwean experience under President Mugabe, follows a deliberate pattern; it signifies a strategic escalation that begins with minimal-risk rhetorical opposition and culminates in the irrevocable break from organisational engagement.

In the initial phase, populist figures use criticism as a tool to undermine the legitimacy of an organisation's functions and norms by portraying it as a remnant of colonial-era dominance. In the case of Zimbabwe, President Mugabe's outspoken criticism repositioned the Commonwealth as a tool of external influence rather than a multilateral space dedicated to fostering democracy and economic progress. This preliminary stage laid the ideological groundwork for subsequent actions by galvanising domestic support through a discourse centred on national sovereignty and opposition to imperial expansion.

Leveraging this discourse, the leadership escalated to extortion, employing the threat of total disengagement as a tool to extract concessions. While not explicitly financial, this approach was evident in the form of diplomatic demands, where any minimal concessions were deemed equivalent to sustained subordination. These strategies were notably apparent during critical diplomatic talks within the internal structures of the Commonwealth, where Zimbabwe's demand for an unconditional lifting of international sanctions underscored its commitment to revisiting the conditions of its engagement.

The subsequent phase, obstruction, involved purposeful disengagement from organisational procedures. While still officially part of the Commonwealth framework, Zimbabwe's unwillingness to engage constructively – such as its absence from CHOGM proceedings and disregard for CMAG recommendations – severely impaired policy formulation and highlighted its reluctance to comply with foreign-imposed principles. This obstruction was not a definitive rupture but a calculated interlude, preserving the potential for future realignment if circumstances ever converge with its nationalist priorities.

Ultimately, the strategy resulted in exit, the most extreme stage of disengagement. Confronted with escalating domestic challenges and a steadfast external context, Zimbabwe's official exit in December 2003 was not simply a procedural decision but a symbolic renunciation of an international organisation that was increasingly seen as prejudiced and unlawful. This pivotal action facilitated the consolidation of Zimbabwe's redefined international profile, as a country resolute in upholding its sovereignty, independent of the limitations of externally enforced norms.

The Zimbabwean withdrawal episode unveils several key insights into the fragilities and hurdles confronting international organisations in a period characterised by the rise of populism in international relations. The step-by-step strategy of disengagement highlights the underlying logic of populist administrations, which frequently perceive external criticism as an insult to national pride rather than productive engagement. This viewpoint can significantly weaken the normative structures that form the foundation of international organisations such as the Commonwealth, consequently reducing their effectiveness in promoting democratic governance and human rights standards.

The Zimbabwean instance of populist disengagement illustrates the shortcomings of international organisations that lack binding enforcement powers. When dealing with countries inclined to move from rhetorical criticism to practical obstruction and eventual disengagement, these organisations have limited options but to adapt to or endure non-adherence. This phenomenon not only questions the viability of collective efforts but also raises doubts about the enduring stability of international governance frameworks in managing politically motivated populist movements.

Zimbabwe's disengagement experience underscores that immediate national priorities, including the imperative to reinforce nationalist legitimacy, can influence decision-making that entails significant and long-lasting repercussions for global politics. The policy shift toward disengagement, while strengthening national sovereignty, concurrently undermines the credibility of the organisational structure and establishes a model for other governments considering analogous approaches. These cases might reinforce a growing tendency toward disengagement from international organisations, consequently weakening the foundational principles of international governance.

Zimbabwe's path from criticism to exit generates insights that aid in crafting more comprehensive engagement strategies. International organisations need to analyse structural solutions that go beyond merely responding to immediate non-adherence while simultaneously minimising the danger of deepening disengagement. This might necessitate the creation of more dynamic and context-driven strategies that provide room for revision rather than complete disengagement, guaranteeing that countries experiencing populist pressures are not constrained to a dichotomous choice between compliance and total disengagement.

The integration of Zimbabwe's case into the analytical model of criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit yields a refined perspective on the challenges populist leaderships pose to international organisations. It underscores the necessity of flexible and robust international governance frameworks equipped to manage the intricacies of nationalist discourse and defiant conduct in international relations. As global dynamics are increasingly influenced by populist movements, the implications extracted from the Zimbabwean withdrawal will significantly contribute to the design of adaptive engagement strategies, diplomatic dialogue and, when required, reconciliation.

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