From Resistance, Institutional Reform, to Consensus: Raila Odinga's Leadership and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of Raila Odinga's political legitimacy within Kenya's democratic transition. It argues that electoral competition alone cannot explain his enduring influence. Using a qualitative historical and interpretive approach, the study analyses his political trajectory through theories of charismatic authority, transformational leadership, consensus democracy, and reconciliation. It traces his progression from political detainee and opposition activist to constitutional reform advocate, coalition builder, and continental statesman. The article identifies three interconnected sources of legitimacy: resistance legitimacy, rooted in sacrifice and democratic activism during the struggle against authoritarian rule; institutional reform legitimacy, grounded in constitutional reform, devolution, and democratic governance; and consensus legitimacy, reflected in coalition politics, reconciliation, and inclusive leadership. While highlighting his contribution to democratisation, the study also examines tensions between reform and elite accommodation, charismatic leadership and institutionalisation, and democratic inclusion and structural transformation. The article contributes a framework for understanding reform-oriented leadership and political legitimacy in African democracies.

Keywords: Raila Odinga; Democratic Leadership; Political Legitimacy; Consensus Politics; Coalition Building; Constitutional Reform; Democratic Transition; Kenya; Statesmanship; Reconciliation; Second Liberation; African Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Hon. Raila Odinga's political career is deeply intertwined with Kenya's democratic transition. Over four decades, he has remained a central figure in national politics as a political detainee, opposition leader, reform advocate, coalition builder, Prime Minister, and statesman (Badejo, 2006; Branch, 2011). Despite loosing in repeated presidential election, he has sustained remarkable political influence and public appeal.

This longevity poses an important question this article seeks to answer: how has Raila maintained political legitimacy despite repeated presidential electoral failures? Existing scholarship explains his significance through democratisation, constitutional reform, ethnic mobilisation, and electoral competition. While these perspectives illuminate his role in key political developments, they often treat his legitimacy only as a product of electoral contestation, overlooking the evolution of his leadership identity across changing political contexts.

This article argues that Raila's legitimacy transcends election outcomes. His transformation from political dissident to consensus-oriented statesman was shaped by sacrifice, resilience, coalition-building, and reform

leadership, broadening the foundations of his political authority. Examining this evolution contributes to wider debates on leadership, legitimacy, and democratic change in Africa (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical and interpretive research design to examine the evolution of Raila Odinga's political legitimacy within Kenya's democratic transition. The analysis is based on documentary research drawing from scholarly books and journal articles, political biographies, constitutional and legal documents, memoirs, policy reports, and historical accounts of democratisation and political reform in Kenya (Branch, 2011; Mutua, 2008; Mutunga, 2014).

Data were analysed through thematic analysis, with particular attention to recurring themes of democratic resistance, constitutional reform, devolution, coalition politics, and reconciliation. Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to Raila's political career and Kenya's democratic development. The study interprets these themes across different phases of Odinga's political journey and examines how his political legitimacy was constructed and sustained over time (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis is informed by Weber's theory of charismatic authority (Weber, 1947), transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006), Lijphart's theory of consensus democracy (Lijphart, 2012), and Mandela's philosophy of reconciliation and nation-building (Mandela, 1994). Drawing on these perspectives, the article conceptualises political legitimacy as comprising three interrelated dimensions: resistance legitimacy, institutional reform legitimacy, and consensus legitimacy.

As an interpretive study, the article does not seek to measure public opinion or electoral support quantitatively. Rather, it provides a theoretically informed analysis of how leadership, reform, and political practice shaped the evolution of Odinga's legitimacy in Kenya's democratisation process.

Part I: Foundations of Resistance Legitimacy

From Opposition Legacy to Democratic Resistance

Although Raila Odinga's entry into Kenyan politics was influenced by the legacy of his father, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, his political course reflected both continuity and adaptation. While Jaramogi shaped his early political consciousness, Raila developed a distinct reformist vision in response to the realities of post-independence Kenya. What began within the oppositional traditions associated with his father's politics evolved into a broader commitment to democratisation, constitutionalism, coalition-building, and institutional reform (Mutua, 2008; Barkan, 2013). This evolution exemplifies transformational leadership, whereby legitimacy is acquired through advancing collective political change rather than relying on inherited political capital (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2022).

As Northouse (2022, pp. 45-58) argues, leadership values and political behaviour are often shaped through early socialisation. Raila's reformist outlook was rooted in his upbringing within Jaramogi's household, where debates about governance, power, and justice were central to everyday life (Badejo, 2006, pp. 15-32; Branch, 2011, pp. 78-95). Witnessing his father's political marginalisation and the suppression of opposition voices after independence cultivated a political consciousness grounded in resistance to authoritarianism, exclusion, and inequality. As a result, he inherited not only a political identity but a tradition of challenging entrenched systems of power.

Jaramogi's politics were informed by African socialism, anti-imperialism, and post-colonial nationalism, advancing a development model that resisted Western capitalist influence (Odinga, 1967, pp. 216-228; Branch,

2011, pp. 35-43). Through the Kenya People's Union (KPU), he criticised elite domination, class inequality, and economic dependency, positioning the party as a vehicle for popular dissent. This oppositional tradition provided the ideological foundation from which Raila would later construct a reform agenda centred on democratic governance and institutional accountability (Branch, 2011, pp. 247-286).

However, Raila's political formation occurred in a different context. Whereas Jaramogi's struggle was shaped by questions of national liberation and anti-imperialist resistance, Raila confronted the challenges of democratisation and governance. His education experience in East Germany exposed him to alternative models of state organisation and development, broadening his understanding of governance and social justice (Badejo, 2006). These experiences encouraged a pragmatic approach to political change and facilitated his transition from the custodian of an inherited oppositional tradition to an independent reform-oriented leader.

This transition was further accelerated by his experiences under President Daniel arap Moi's regime. Following the failed 1982 coup attempt, Raila was detained without trial and later subjected to repeated arrests because of his involvement in pro-democracy activism (Badejo, 2006, pp. 109-115; IFES, n.d.). These experiences reinforced his commitment to constitutionalism, civil liberties, and democratic governance, while enhancing his credibility among reform advocates and the wider public. Rather than remaining an inherited political legacy, opposition became a lived experience that deepened his identification with democratic resistance.

From a Weberian perspective, imprisonment contributed significantly to the development of Raila's charismatic authority. Weber (1947) argues that charismatic legitimacy emerges when followers perceive a leader as demonstrating extraordinary commitment and sacrifice in pursuit of a collective cause. Raila's prolonged detention for his democratic activism fostered such perceptions, distinguishing him from many conventional political actors. His suffering came to symbolise a broader struggle for political freedom, inclusion, and accountability. Detention thus evolved from a personal ordeal into a politically formative experience that reinforced his commitment to constitutional reform and limitations on executive power.

These experiences transformed Raila's political identity and leadership orientation. Rather than reproducing Jaramogi's anti-imperialist ideology, he redirected opposition politics towards the demands of democratic transition, emphasising political mobilisation, constitutional change, and the construction of broad-based political alliances (Branch, 2011). Through coalition-building, he expanded his support beyond ethnic and regional strongholds, strengthening his position as a national political figure. As James Ogude (2025) observes, Raila's significance lies in his ability to transcend inherited ethnic and political identities and recast himself as a national reform leader. His prominent role in the struggle for multiparty democracy, the 2005 constitutional referendum, and the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution further consolidated this image (Mutua, 2008; Branch, 2011).

His very relational leadership style reinforced this transformation. According to Ogude (2025), Raila remained accessible despite his national prominence. This enabled him to cultivate durable networks across ethnic, regional, and class divides. Such interpersonal capabilities complemented his reform agenda and strengthened his capacity to mobilise diverse constituencies around shared political objectives.

The relationship between Raila and Jaramogi is therefore best understood as one of continuity and adaptation rather than simple succession. Both were committed to challenging exclusionary political structures and expanding political participation, yet they operated within distinct historical circumstances that required different political strategies. While Jaramogi framed political struggle through African socialism, anti-imperialism, and resistance to neo-colonial domination, Raila pursued change through constitutionalism, democratic institution-building, and coalition politics. Whereas Jaramogi sought to challenge unjust power structures from outside the state, Raila focused on transforming them through institutional reform. This shift reflected the realities of the post-Cold War era, where the central political challenge was no longer national liberation but the democratisation of state institutions and the consolidation of constitutional governance.

Raila's enduring significance therefore lies not just in inheriting an oppositional tradition but in adapting it to the demands of democratic transition. By transforming a legacy of dissent into a broad-based movement for constitutional reform and political inclusion, he became a central figure in Kenya's democratic and constitutional development (Branch, 2011; Mutunga, 2014). Yet inherited opposition consciousness alone cannot explain his enduring political legitimacy. The decisive experience that transformed an oppositional identity into a source of moral authority and charismatic credibility was political detention. Through imprisonment, personal sacrifice became intertwined with the wider struggle for democracy, providing a powerful foundation for his subsequent leadership.

Detention and Charismatic Legitimacy

Raila Odinga's widespread appeal among many Kenyans transcended popularity. Rather, it emerged from deeper tensions within Kenya's democratic development concerning political exclusion, state centralisation, and access to political power. Throughout his political career, Raila positioned himself as a prominent critic of authoritarianism, unequal power relations, and the marginalisation of certain Kenyan communities. His repeated opposition to successive governments enabled many citizens to view him as a representative of their grievances and aspirations for political change (Branch, 2011, pp. 214-218). In this process, he accumulated what Bourdieu (1986) describes as symbolic capital, deriving legitimacy not from formal office alone but from his association with collective struggles for justice, inclusion, and democratic reform.

The foundations of this symbolic legitimacy were strengthened through his experiences of political confrontation, detention, and advocacy for constitutional reform. Periods of detention under the Moi regime transformed Raila from just an opposition politician into a symbol of democratic resistance (Badejo, 2006, pp. 112-118). His imprisonment was interpreted as evidence of personal sacrifice for a broader political cause, strengthening perceptions of him as a defender of democracy and marginalised communities. His representation of Kibera further reinforced this image by associating his political identity with some of Kenya's most disadvantaged political and economic populations (Ogude, 2011, pp. 143-145). As such, support for Raila evolved beyond conventional electoral loyalty into a broader political identity centred on social justice and democratic reform.

This development can also be understood through Weber's concept of charismatic legitimacy. According to Weber (1947), charismatic authority emerges when followers attribute exceptional qualities to a leader because of demonstrated courage, sacrifice, or commitment to a collective cause. Raila's reputation was not only constructed through political success but also through what he endured: imprisonment, political setbacks, and sustained opposition to authoritarian rule. These experiences distinguished him from ordinary political actors and enabled supporters to view him as embodying broader democratic aspirations. His authority therefore extended beyond formal political positions. It became rooted in the belief that he represented a struggle for political inclusion and democratic transformation.

The emergence of charismatic legitimacy helps explain why many Kenyans remained loyal to Raila despite repeated electoral defeats. For a substantial portion of his supporters, Raila came to symbolise an unfinished democratic project rather than simply an electoral candidate (Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 164-166; Mueller, 2018, pp. 95-98). Transformational leadership theory suggests that followers often remain committed to leaders who successfully link personal aspirations to broader collective goals (Burns, 1978, p. 20; Bass & Riggio, 2006, pp. 5-7). Raila's role in the struggle for governance transformation cultivated a perception that his political mission transcended electoral competition. As a result, loyalty to Raila persisted despite unfavourable electoral outcomes.

His credibility was further reinforced by his contribution to democratic reform processes during Kenya's Second Liberation and subsequent constitutional reforms (Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 164-166). Periods of detention, exile, and political adversity enhanced rather than diminished his legitimacy because supporters interpreted such experiences as evidence of commitment and political sacrifice (Mueller, 2018, pp. 95-97). Likewise, his support

for coalition politics, devolution, and broader political inclusion appealed to communities seeking greater representation and a more equitable distribution of state resources (Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 170-172). Electoral defeats, therefore, did not undermine his support base, which evaluated his leadership on the long-term reform objectives rather than short-term electoral outcomes.

However, the durability of Raila's popularity also reveals an important contradiction within Kenya's democratisation process. Although he championed institutional reform, demands for political change often became personalised around his leadership. Rather than being channelled through impersonal democratic institutions, reform politics often relied on his symbolic authority and charismatic appeal. As Cheeseman (2015, pp. 146-150) observes, this reflects a broader characteristic of Kenyan politics in which popular demands for institutional transformation are mobilised through influential individuals rather than institutional frameworks alone.

Indeed, Raila's enduring support cannot be explained by his reformist credentials or charismatic authority alone. Scholars have identified other contributing factors such as ethnic mobilisation, regional political identities, and perceptions of electoral injustice, all of which sustained support among many of his followers (Mueller, 2018, pp. 100-103; Branch & Cheeseman, 2009, pp. 12-15). So, continued loyalty reflected a complex interaction between democratic ideals, charismatic leadership, historical grievances, and communal political affiliations. His support base therefore represented both a reform constituency and a coalition of communities that perceived themselves as politically excluded within Kenya's power structure.

Raila's political career illustrates both the strengths and limitations of charismatic and transformational leadership in democratic transitions. On one hand, his symbolic legitimacy enabled him to mobilise broad support for political change. Yet on the other hand, the personalisation of reform politics highlighted the continuing challenge of translating charismatic mobilisation into durable democratic institutions. His enduring popularity therefore reveals a central tension within Kenya's democratisation process. That is, while charismatic leaders can articulate demands for reform and mobilise the nation, sustainable democratic consolidation will, in the end, depend on the strengthening of institutions rather than continued reliance on individual political figures (Branch, 2011, pp. 232-238).

This tension helps explain both why many Kenyans identified with Raila and why they remained loyal to him despite electoral setbacks. Their support was not just a response to electoral politics; it reflected a broader belief that he embodied the struggle for political inclusion, democratic reform, and social justice within contemporary Kenya. So, charismatic legitimacy served as the bridge between resistance politics and subsequent institutional reform leadership.

The Second Liberation and Reform Leadership

The reintroduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s marked a decisive turning point in Raila Odinga's political development, transforming him from a regional opposition figure into a leading actor in Kenya's Second Liberation movement (Anderson & Throup, 2005, pp. 58-62). Willy Mutunga identifies Raila as a central figure in the Second Liberation, a movement in which resistance to authoritarianism depended upon broad democratic alliances rather than ethnic mobilisation alone (Mutunga, 2014). Through repeated detention, sustained opposition to one-party rule, and advocacy for political pluralism, Raila evolved into one of the principal architects of Kenya's democratic transition.

Working alongside civil society organisations, religious leaders, intellectuals, students, and opposition politicians, Raila emerged as a prominent advocate of political pluralism, constitutional reform, government accountability, and citizen participation. These experiences shaped a leadership style that emphasised coalition-building, consultation, inclusion and negotiation rather than personalised authority. As Cheeseman (2015, pp. 94-99) observes, democratic transitions often depend upon cooperation among diverse actors with competing

interests. Raila's involvement in successive political alliances, therefore, reflected not only political pragmatism but also an enduring commitment to coalition politics as a mechanism for advancing reform.

At the same time, these alliances exposed the structural constraints of Kenya's democratisation process. Electoral competition, ethnic bargaining, and elite negotiation remained central features of the political landscape, often limiting the scope of reform initiatives (Cheeseman et al., 2016, pp. 7-12). Consequently, Raila's shifting political partnerships should be understood less as evidence of ideological inconsistency than as responses to the institutional realities within which reform-oriented politics operates. Indeed, his political career illustrates the broader tensions that accompany democratic transitions, where reformers must pursue institutional change while operating within political systems shaped by patronage, ethnic mobilisation, and elite accommodation.

Despite these constraints, Raila remained a significant advocate of constitutionalism, devolution, institutional accountability, and democratic governance. His reform agenda contributed to the wider struggles that culminated in the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, which sought to limit executive dominance, strengthen checks and balances, and expand citizen participation in governance (Mutunga, 2014, pp. 145-168). By linking political liberalisation to institutional transformation, he helped shift public debate beyond the introduction of multiparty elections towards the broader question of how democratic governance could be consolidated in Kenya.

Nevertheless, as Branch (2011, pp. 232-238) notes, reform-oriented politicians frequently operated within the very systems they sought to transform. Rather than diminishing Raila's reform credentials, this contradiction underscores the difficulties of pursuing democratic change within deeply entrenched political structures (Lynch, 2011, pp. 187-192). The Second Liberation therefore established Raila as both a leading advocate of democratic reform and a product of the political environment in which that reform was pursued. His legacy lies not only in his contribution to constitutional and democratic change but also in the way his political trajectory reflects the opportunities, compromises, and constraints that have shaped Kenya's democratic consolidation (Anderson & Throup, 2005, pp. 58-62; Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 146-150).

Part II: Institutional Reform Legitimacy

Constitutional Reform, Devolution, and the Pursuit of Institutional Democracy

Constitutional reform transformed Raila's legitimacy from resistance-derived legitimacy into institutional reform legitimacy. The violence that followed Kenya's disputed 2007 presidential election exposed fundamental weaknesses in the country's constitutional order. Electoral conflict reflected not merely political rivalry but deeper structural problems. These included an over-centralised presidency, weak accountability mechanisms, regional inequalities, and a winner-takes-all political system that raised the stakes of electoral competition (Branch, 2011, pp. 224-238). Although the National Accord of 2008 ended the immediate crisis through political compromise, it was widely understood as a temporary settlement rather than a lasting solution. For Raila Odinga, the events of 2007-2008 reinforced the conviction that sustainable peace required more than elite agreements; it demanded comprehensive institutional reform capable of addressing the underlying causes of political instability.

The transition from the Grand Coalition Government to the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution therefore marked a critical shift from crisis management to institutional statesmanship. Raila's willingness to participate in the coalition government demonstrated a commitment to national stability during a period of uncertainty. More significantly, however, his subsequent support for constitutional reform reflected an appreciation that democratic governance depends on strong institutions rather than political bargains alone. Durable peace required constitutional arrangements capable of constraining executive power, protecting rights, broadening participation, and reducing the incentives for violent electoral competition (Mueller, 2018, pp. 188-193).

Central to this vision was Raila's long-standing critique of Kenya's postcolonial state. His opposition to the proposed 2005 Constitution and later support for the 2010 Constitution reflected a consistent belief that excessive concentration of power in the presidency had undermined democratic accountability and fuelled political exclusion (Branch, 2011, pp. 210-213). The 2010 Constitution consequently introduced a range of institutional reforms, including strengthened checks and balances, judicial independence, enhanced rights protections, and devolution of political authority. Collectively, these measures sought to institutionalise accountability and create a more inclusive system of governance capable of accommodating Kenya's social and regional diversity (Mueller, 2018, pp. 193-201).

Among these reforms, devolution emerged as one of the most transformative expressions of Raila's institutional vision. Designed to reverse decades of political and economic centralisation, devolution transferred significant powers and resources to forty-seven county governments (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; Mueller, 2018, pp. 1-6). The reform responded to widespread perceptions that successive governments had concentrated development and political influence within a limited number of regions while marginalising others. By dispersing authority and resources, devolution aimed to create a more equitable relationship between citizens and the state while strengthening democratic participation at the local level.

Raila became one of the most prominent advocates of devolution because it aligned closely with his broader commitment to social justice, inclusion, and institutional democracy (Cheeseman, 2015). He presented the reform as a mechanism for addressing historical injustices and integrating previously marginalised communities into national development processes. In this respect, devolution represented more than administrative decentralisation; it embodied a vision of citizenship based on participation, recognition, and belonging. County governments created new opportunities for local decision-making and increased the visibility of communities that had often perceived themselves as excluded from the national political project.

At the same time, support for devolution also carried political advantages. By advocating a governance structure that promised greater local autonomy and access to resources, Raila appealed to communities that had long associated centralised rule with political and economic exclusion. Consequently, devolution functioned both as a democratic reform and as a political strategy through which broad coalitions could be mobilised around shared grievances and demands for recognition. This dual character reflected a recurring feature of Raila's leadership philosophy, where principled commitments to reform often intersected with the practical realities of coalition-building and electoral competition.

However, the implementation of constitutional reform and devolution has also revealed the limits of institutional change. Although devolved government has improved service delivery and expanded local participation in many counties, it has not entirely dismantled patterns of inequality, patronage, and political exclusion (Mueller, 2018, pp. 201-205). In some cases, power has simply shifted from national elites to county-level elites, reproducing many of the same dynamics that reformers sought to address. Competition over devolved resources has at times intensified local political rivalries, while ethnic mobilisation and contested elections continue to shape political behaviour at both national and local levels.

These developments illustrate a broader contradiction within Raila's constitutional project. While he consistently championed impersonal institutions as the foundation of democratic governance, the reform agenda remained closely associated with his personal leadership and political mobilisation. As Cheeseman (2015, pp. 146-150) observes, institutional reform in Kenya has frequently depended upon charismatic political actors to build public support, creating an enduring tension between constitutional principles and political practice. The success of constitutional reforms therefore depended not only on the institutions themselves but also on the willingness of political actors to operate within the norms those institutions were intended to establish.

Nevertheless, Raila's contribution to constitutional reform and devolution remains one of the clearest expressions of statesmanship in his political career. Unlike the National Accord, which primarily sought to contain an

immediate political crisis, the constitutional settlement attempted to address the structural conditions that made such crises possible. Through constitutionalism and devolution, Raila advanced a vision of governance centred on accountability, inclusion, and the dispersal of political power. Yet the mixed outcomes of these reforms also demonstrate a central dilemma of democratic statesmanship: leaders can create institutions that enable democracy, but they cannot guarantee the political behaviour necessary to sustain them. Raila's constitutional legacy therefore illustrates both the transformative potential and the inherent limitations of institution-centred democratic reform in Kenya, highlighting the continuing challenge of translating constitutional change into substantive democratic transformation.

Part III: Consensus Legitimacy

Coalition Politics, Consensus and Reconciliation

Raila Odinga's experience in East Germany shaped his understanding of governance, state-building, and political organisation in ways that would later influence his approach to democratic reform. During his studies at the Herder Institute in Leipzig and later in Magdeburg in the 1960s and 1970s, he encountered a political culture that emphasised strong institutions, collective organisation, and political coordination (Odinga, 2013, pp. 42-48). Although East Germany was authoritarian, Raila drew from the experience a lasting appreciation for the role of institutions in maintaining political order and advancing national development. He subsequently argued that Kenya's ethnic fragmentation could be addressed through effective state-building and a shared national vision, often invoking Otto von Bismarck's role in German unification as an example of how political institutions can foster cohesion across Kenya’s diverse communities (Odinga, 2013, pp. 45-47).

These institutional lessons informed Raila's enduring commitment to coalition politics. While East Germany did not practise democratic coalition government, its emphasis on organised collective action reinforced his belief that meaningful political change requires cooperation across competing interests. In Kenya's ethnically diverse and politically fragmented environment, this translated into a preference for broad alliances and negotiated power-sharing arrangements. Coalition-building therefore became more than an electoral instrument; it represented a strategy for promoting inclusion, national cohesion, and democratic stability.

This approach closely aligns with Lijphart's (2012, pp. 25-42) theory of consensus democracy, which views negotiation, accommodation, and power-sharing as effective mechanisms for governing plural societies. Throughout his political career, Raila was central to the formation of major political alliances, including the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), the National Super Alliance (NASA), and Azimio la Umoja. These coalitions united diverse ethnic, regional, and political constituencies and reflected his conviction that substantial reform could only be achieved through collective action rather than majoritarian dominance (Mueller, 2018, pp. 112-123).

At the same time, Raila's coalition politics reveal the tension between normative commitments and political realities. Although rooted in ideals of inclusion and institutional cooperation, coalition-building also reflected the practical requirements of Kenya's competitive political system, where electoral success often depends on elite bargaining and cross-regional alliances (Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 94-99; Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2016, pp. 7-12). As a result, his coalition strategy functioned both as a principled commitment to consensus and as a pragmatic response to the constraints of Kenyan politics.

The limitations of this approach became evident as many of the alliances he helped construct proved vulnerable to internal rivalries, shifting loyalties, and competing ambitions. Building broad coalitions frequently required compromises with actors whose commitment to reform was inconsistent, creating a tension between political inclusion and ideological coherence. Rather than always advancing institutional transformation, coalition politics sometimes reproduced the elite accommodation that reform efforts sought to transcend (Mueller, 2018, pp. 124-127).

Nelson Mandela's philosophy of reconciliation further reinforced this consensus-oriented approach to leadership. Unlike the more confrontational legacy associated with Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's opposition politics, Mandela offered a model that sought to balance the pursuit of justice with the demands of national unity. Following twenty-seven years of imprisonment, he rejected retributive politics in favour of dialogue, forgiveness, and inclusive governance as foundations for democratic transition and long-term stability (Mandela, 1994, pp. 542-547). His example strengthened Raila's belief that leadership in divided societies requires not only resistance to injustice but also the capacity to manage conflict in ways that preserve social cohesion.

Mandela's willingness to reconcile with former adversaries influenced Raila's conviction that personal grievances and political setbacks should not outweigh broader national interests (*Ogude 2*025). This influence was evident in his cooperation with President Daniel Arap Moi, his support for the 2008 Grand Coalition Government, the 2018 Handshake with President Uhuru Kenyatta, and later efforts at broad-based political cooperation with President William Ruto in 2024. In each case, Raila prioritised negotiation and accommodation over prolonged political confrontation, reflecting his view that democratic stability depends on dialogue between competing political actors.

The 2018 Handshake represented the clearest expression of this reconciliation-centred leadership philosophy. Coming after the disputed 2017 elections, the agreement between Raila Odinga and President Uhuru Kenyatta was presented as a means of reducing political tensions, strengthening national cohesion, and preventing further polarisation. Viewed through Mandela's framework of reconciliation, it sought to transform political antagonism into cooperation by encouraging dialogue between former rivals (Mandela, 1994). Rather than maintaining a confrontational stance, Raila embraced compromise and engagement, a decision many supporters interpreted as an act of political maturity and statesmanship.

The Handshake contributed to short-term political stability by lowering tensions and creating space for national dialogue during a period of significant division. Consistent with Mandela's commitment to reconciliation and the African ethic of Ubuntu, which emphasises shared humanity, dignity, and mutual responsibility (Tutu, 1999, pp. 34-37), it reinforced Raila's longstanding commitment to inclusive politics and peaceful conflict resolution. In a political environment often shaped by ethnic polarisation and winner-takes-all competition, the initiative demonstrated the potential of reconciliation as a mechanism for preserving national unity.

Yet the Handshake also exposed the contradictions inherent in consensus-based politics. Critics argued that it represented not only a commitment to national reconciliation but also a form of elite accommodation that facilitated Raila's return to the centre of political influence after a period of exclusion from formal state power. The agreement therefore appeared to serve both normative and strategic purposes, raising questions about whether it represented genuine democratic reform or a pragmatic bargain between political elites.

Moreover, the rapprochement blurred the distinction between government and opposition, potentially weakening democratic accountability. As Lijphart (2012, pp. 44-47) notes, democratic governance requires not only inclusion and consensus but also meaningful political competition and oversight. By drawing the opposition closer to the executive, the Handshake arguably reduced the capacity of opposition forces to scrutinise government actions and articulate alternative policy visions. The pursuit of stability, therefore, may have come at the cost of democratic contestation.

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), which emerged from the Handshake, further illustrated this dilemma. Presented as a framework for national unity, inclusivity, and constitutional reform, BBI embodied Raila's belief that political stability could be strengthened through consensus and institutional cooperation. However, critics contended that it prioritised elite accommodation and power-sharing arrangements over deeper governance challenges, including electoral integrity, institutional accountability, and implementation of existing constitutional provisions. As a result, it highlighted the limitations of elite-driven consensus as a vehicle for transformative reform.

More broadly, both the Handshake and BBI revealed the constraints of reconciliation politics in Kenya. While they succeeded in reducing tensions among political leaders, they did little to address the underlying drivers of recurring political conflict, including electoral distrust, socio-economic inequality, and perceptions of exclusion from state power. This underscores a key distinction between Mandela's South African experience and Kenya's political context. Mandela pursued reconciliation within a negotiated democratic transition supported by broad institutional restructuring. Whereas Kenyan reconciliation efforts have often functioned as mechanisms for managing recurring political crises within an already established but contested democratic framework.

Taken together, the influences of German institutionalism and Mandela's politics of reconciliation produced a leadership philosophy centred on negotiation, inclusion, and institutional cooperation. Raila's commitment to coalition-building, consensus, and dialogue reflects his belief that national cohesion in a diverse society depends on broad-based political collaboration rather than winner-takes-all competition. Yet the Kenyan context has frequently transformed these ideals into elite bargaining arrangements that promote stability while limiting the scope for deeper structural reform. His political career therefore illustrates a broader paradox facing reformist leaders in divided societies: the coalitions and reconciliatory agreements required to sustain inclusion and stability can simultaneously constrain the transformative change they are intended to achieve.

Part IV: Contradictions and Limits

Contradictions of Reform Politics

Despite his central role in Kenya's democratisation, Raila Odinga's political career illustrates the inherent tensions of reform politics in hybrid and neo-patrimonial political systems. Rather than representing personal inconsistencies alone, these contradictions reflect broader theoretical debates regarding the relationship between democratic reform, elite accommodation, and institutional transformation.

One of the most significant critiques concerns the tension between reformist mobilisation and elite pact-making. Transitology scholars such as O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, pp. 37-39) argue that democratic transitions are often shaped through negotiations between regime and opposition elites. While such pacts can prevent instability and facilitate institutional reform, they may also preserve existing power relations by limiting more radical transformations. Raila's participation in the 2008 Grand Coalition Government and the 2018 Handshake and Broad-Based Government of 2024 with President William Ruto exemplifies this dilemma. As Willis, Lynch, Kanyinga and Cheeseman argue, he simultaneously challenged and participated in elite bargaining arrangements (Willis et al., 2025, para. 4). Consequently, his politics often expanded democratic inclusion while reinforcing the elite-centred nature of political decision-making.

A second critique emerges from institutionalist perspectives. Although Raila consistently advocated constitutionalism, devolution and democratic accountability, opposition politics frequently revolved around his personal leadership. This reflects what Bratton and van de Walle (1997, pp. 61-68) identify as a recurring challenge in African democratisation: charismatic opposition figures may mobilise resistance to authoritarianism yet inadvertently weaken institutional development by concentrating political legitimacy around individual leaders rather than organisations. Raila's influence enhanced opposition cohesion but also contributed to the personalisation of reform politics.

Furthermore, his reform agenda raises questions regarding the distinction between political and socio-economic citizenship. While constitutional reform, civil liberties and devolution expanded democratic participation, structural inequalities remained largely intact. Persistent challenges relating to youth unemployment, land ownership, inequality and patronage suggest that procedural democratic gains did not necessarily translate into substantive socio-economic transformation (Willis et al., 2025, para. 4). From this perspective, Raila's reform project reflects a broader limitation identified by democratic theorists: political liberalisation does not automatically produce social justice or economic redistribution.

The debate surrounding Raila's shifting political alliances can also be interpreted through the lens of neo-patrimonial politics. Badejo characterises him as an "enigma" whose political flexibility contributed both to his survival and his controversial reputation (Badejo, 2006, pp. 210-225). While supporters view such adaptability as pragmatic within Kenya's fluid political environment, critics argue that repeated realignments weakened ideological coherence and reinforced the logic of elite-centred coalition building. Rather than transforming the political system, these alliances often required operating within its existing patronage structures.

More fundamentally, Branch and Cheeseman contend that executive dominance, patronage networks and elite bargaining have historically constrained transformative political change in Kenya (Branch & Cheeseman, 2006, pp. 11-31; Branch & Cheeseman, 2009, pp. 1-26). Viewed through this lens, Raila's limitations were not simply personal shortcomings but manifestations of structural constraints embedded within the Kenyan state. His career therefore demonstrates the difficulty of pursuing democratic reform while remaining politically viable within a system shaped by patronage, ethnic coalition-building and executive power.

Overall, Raila's legacy embodies a central paradox of democratisation theory: reform leaders often require the cooperation of the very elites and institutions they seek to transform. His political trajectory reveals the tensions between opposition and accommodation, charismatic leadership and institutionalisation, and democratic inclusion and structural transformation. These contradictions help explain why he remains both one of Kenya's most influential reformers and one of its most contested political figures.

Part V: Continental Legitimacy

From National Reformer to Continental Statesman

Raila Odinga's move from national reformer to continental statesman represents the culmination of his leadership evolution. Raila’s appointment as the African Union High Representative for Infrastructure Development marked a significant transition from national opposition politics to continental leadership (African Union, 2020). The role expanded his engagement beyond Kenya's domestic reform agenda and positioned him within wider debates on regional integration, infrastructure connectivity, and economic transformation across Africa. This task reflected the culmination of his domestic career, enhancing his profile as a continental political actor.

Raila's appointment aligns with long-standing Pan-African aspirations for continental unity and economic integration. Pan-African thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah (1963, pp. 132-145) argued that Africa's development depends upon overcoming the fragmentation inherited from colonial rule through greater economic and political cooperation. Infrastructure development therefore assumes strategic significance because transport corridors, energy networks, and digital connectivity can facilitate trade, mobility, and regional interdependence. Raila's advocacy of infrastructure-led development reflects this tradition by presenting connectivity as a foundation for continental integration and collective prosperity.

However, in a critique of this position, modernisation theories assume that economic growth generated through large-scale infrastructure projects will eventually benefit wider society. Yet political economy approaches highlight how development outcomes depend upon existing power relations and institutional capacity (Mkandawire, 2001, pp. 289-314). Infrastructure can stimulate economic growth while simultaneously reproducing inequalities if access to its benefits remains uneven. As a result, improved connectivity does not automatically translate into poverty reduction, democratic participation, or social inclusion.

There is a broader tension between developmentalism and democratic governance, manifest in the role. Infrastructure is frequently promoted as a technical solution to underdevelopment. Such approaches may understate the importance of accountability, representation, and distributive justice. From an institutionalist perspective, development outcomes depend not only on physical networks but also on the quality of governance

structures responsible for managing them. Without effective institutions, infrastructure projects risk reinforcing elite interests rather than promoting broad-based development.

Raila's continental engagement reinforces his reputation as a Pan-African statesman committed to regional cooperation and development. Yet its significance should be assessed critically. The appointment highlights not only the possibilities of infrastructure-led integration but also the continuing challenge of ensuring that economic development translates into democratic inclusion, social justice, and equitable distribution of opportunities. In this regard, Raila's continental vision reflects a central debate within contemporary African development: whether integration and growth alone can deliver the transformative outcomes long promised by Pan-Africanism.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Raila Odinga's political path as a lens for understanding the evolution of political legitimacy in a democratising African state. It has argued that electoral outcomes or the attainment of executive office cannot explain his enduring influence. Rather, his political significance derives from his sustained role in advancing democratic reform, promoting constitutionalism, and expanding political inclusion within Kenya's evolving democratic order.

The analysis identified three interconnected sources of legitimacy that have characterised Odinga's leadership. First, his participation in resisting authoritarian rule and advocating for multiparty democracy. This generated resistance legitimacy rooted in sacrifice, democratic activism, and opposition to political exclusion. Second, his involvement in constitutional reform. His support for devolution contributed to institutional legitimacy by linking Raila’s political leadership to the strengthening of democratic governance and accountability. Third, his engagement in coalition politics and national reconciliation initiatives reflected a form of consensus legitimacy aimed at fostering inclusion and political stability in a deeply divided society.

Beyond the Kenyan case, the article contributes to broader debates on leadership and democratisation. It demonstrates that political legitimacy is not static and is not solely derived from electoral success. Instead, legitimacy evolves in response to changing historical and institutional contexts. The distinction proposed here between resistance legitimacy, institutional legitimacy, and consensus legitimacy provides a useful framework for analysing reform-oriented leadership in transitional democracies where political influence extends beyond formal state power.

At the same time, the study highlights the tensions inherent in reform politics. While coalition-building and negotiated settlements promoted stability and broadened participation, they also raised concerns regarding elite accommodation, which diluted reform agendas. Likewise, constitutional reforms expanded democratic space without fully overcoming longstanding inequalities and patterns of political exclusion. These limitations underscore the broader challenge of translating institutional reform into substantive democratic transformation.

In the end, Raila Odinga's most enduring contribution lies in his role as a catalyst for democratic change. Through his advocacy for multiparty democracy, constitutional reform, devolution, and inclusive governance, he helped reshape the institutional foundations of contemporary Kenya. His political career therefore illustrates how reform leaders can exercise enduring influence without necessarily attaining state power. Viewed from this perspective, the Kenyan experience demonstrates that the importance of political leadership in transitional societies is best assessed by its capacity to transform institutions, expand democratic participation, and redefine the possibilities of political change.

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