

Africa's New Social Movements: A Continental Approach

by Hisham Aidi

Summary

Scholars of social movements and global protest have long neglected social movements in Africa, ostensibly because African societies are too rural, too tradition- or ethnicity-bound, or lacking advanced class formations. Those who have broached the topic tend to focus on South Africa's labor movement and anti-apartheid struggle. Even less addressed is how social movements in various parts of the continent have affected each other. A continent-wide approach however shows that protests in sub-Saharan Africa preceded the North African uprisings, by almost a decade. These protests had similar objectives and faced comparable obstacles, yet much of the scholarship on the "Arab Spring" has ignored the sub-Saharan connections and precedents. How did these movements build on earlier waves of political agitation? How do these "protest coalitions" combine political and economic motivations?

In January 2011, shortly after the ouster of Tunisian president Ben Ali, hundreds of protestors gathered in front of the United Nations office in the Gabonese capital of Libreville demanding the recognition of an opposition figure as president. Some months later, student protests erupted out at the University of Malawi, after the government intimidated a professor of the social sciences, who dared discuss the Arab spring in his class. The protests in Libreville and Lilongwe would draw a violent response from the respective Gabonese and Malawian regimes. In Zimbabwe, student activists and trade unionists organized meetings to talk about the uprisings; many were promptly arrested and accused of treason—the Zimbabwean state media would thereafter avoid showing images of the North African revolts. In September 2011, as protests spread to far-flung corners of Africa, the Kenyan newspaper *The Daily Nation* posed the question on everyone's mind: "Will the Arab Uprising

spread to Sub-Saharan Africa?"¹ Similarly, an American newspaper would ask, "Now that Egypt's Mubarak is out, could Gabon's Bongo be next?"

Scholars of social movements and global protest have long neglected social movements in Africa, ostensibly because African societies are too rural, too tradition- or ethnicity-bound, or lacking advanced class formations. Those who have broached the topic tend to focus on South Africa's labor movement and anti-apartheid struggle. Even less addressed is how social movements in various parts of the continent have affected each other.² In Uganda, the North Africa protests would inspire the "Walk to Work" campaign in opposition to price hikes in fuel and food staples. When the Ugandan opposition tried to stage a

1. "Will the Arab Uprising Spread to Sub-Saharan Africa?" *The Daily Nation*, (September 8 2011)

2. Jolyon Ford, "Democracy and Change: What are the Prospects for an "African Spring"?", *African Futures*, 14 July 2012

“victory parade” in solidarity with the Libyan rebels, the government prohibited such a gathering. In November 2011, two Ethiopians – a teacher and a policeman – would set themselves on fire, inspired by Mohammed Bouazizi the Tunisian street vendor who self-immolated. The southward spread of the revolts would surprise Western observers.³ As *The Christian Science Monitor* would bluntly state: “The revolutionary protests in Tunisia and Egypt weren’t supposed to spread south to sub-Saharan Africa.”⁴

But the political contagion sparked by the 2011 North African revolts in other regions of Africa did not surprise seasoned analysts of Africa.⁵ Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani would observe, “The memory of Tahrir Square feeds opposition hopes and fuels government fears in many African polities.”⁶ Moreover, the fact that protests were more likely to spread from North Africa southward (rather than northward from sub-Saharan Africa) is more likely a indicator of the weakness of pan-African consciousness in North Africa (compared to other parts of the continent), than evidence that “sub-Saharan Africa” is “behind the curve” or “playing catch-up” – as some observers have asserted. As political scientists Zachariah Mampilly and Adam Branch have demonstrated, a continent-wide approach shows that protests in sub-Saharan Africa preceded the North African uprisings, by almost a decade, yet much of the scholarship on the “Arab Spring” has ignored the sub-Saharan connections and precedents. Yet, these protests had similar objectives and faced comparable obstacles. How do these protest movements build on earlier waves of political agitation? How do these “protest coalitions” combine political and economic motivations?

In gauging the impact of Africa’s protest movements, it is worth stressing that analytic categories and designations derived from the study of European and American (and even Latin American) social movements – the binaries of demonstrators versus rioters; political versus economic protest; violence versus non-violence – may not be helpful in the African context.⁷ Likewise, theories of protest that derive from the experience of more industrialized states

– frameworks that valorize the role of labor, the middle class, or civil society (such as Gene Sharp’s well-regarded “civil society approach” wherein protests are organized and involve nonviolent pressuring of the state to reform itself)⁸ may not fully elucidate the often inchoate, underclass-driven protests of Africa.

“Anti-Colonial Movements”

The first wave of protests to sweep across the continent were the anti-colonial protests of the 1940s and 1950s. The aim was to overthrow an exploitative colonial state that had instituted elaborate social and racial hierarchies that deeply fragmented African societies. Various anti-colonial thinkers have noted how colonial rule deliberately atomized and segmented African societies: from Frantz Fanon who observed that the colonial world is divided into “compartments”⁹ to Mamdani’s theory of the “bifurcated state” whereby colonial administrators divided populations into “settlers” and “natives,” “races” and “ethnicities,” bound to urban and rural areas ruled respectively by civil law and customary law. Rural areas were governed by a “Native” authority, yet with migration to urban areas, colonial authorities dreaded the disruptive effect of “de-tribalized natives” in the cities.¹⁰ As these rural migrants came to constitute an urban underclass (or “lumpenproletariat” in Fanon’s words), colonial administrators would use labor unions to control the workers – absorbing laborers into the transport sector and the lower echelons of the state bureaucracy, thereby separating the incipient working class from the “lumpenproletariat.”¹¹ “[B]y the late 1940s,” writes historian Fred Cooper, “influential officials wanted Africa to have a working class, to separate an identifiable group of people from the backwardness of rural Africa, attach its members to particular jobs and career ladders and overtime make them into a predictable and productive collectivity.”¹² This rationale would extend to the political geography of cities whereby colonial officials sought to spatially separate residential areas of formal workers from the informal urban areas. And it was the denizens of

3. Calestous Juma, “The African Summer,” *Foreign Policy* (28 July 2011)

4. “Now that Egypt’s Mubarak is out, could Gabon’s Bongo be next?,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (February 12 2011)

5. Clive Gabay, “Who’s heard of the “African Spring”?” *openDemocracy*, (25 July 2012)

6. Mahmood Mamdani, “An African reflection on Tahrir Square,” *Pambazuka News* (529), (May 12 2011)

7. Kurt Schock, “Nonviolent action and its misconceptions: Insights for social scientists,” *Political Science and Politics* 36 (4): 705–12 (2003)

8. Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Pub (2005)

9. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press 1963) p.37

10. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton 1996)

11. Fred Cooper “Introduction: urban space, industrial time and wage labour in Africa,” in Fred Cooper (ed.), *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labour, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa* (Sage 1983)

12. Fred Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996)

the formal urban areas – students, workers, civil servants – who would form the backbone of the anti-colonial movements.

Thus, in the 1950s, anti-colonial leaders faced the daunting challenge of having to forge a movement out of a deeply segmented population. These nationalist leaders would initially – inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King – use non-violent methods to challenge the colonial states. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana with his strategy of “positive action” and civil disobedience was explicitly drawing on Gandhi.¹³ Likewise, Kenneth Kaunda was also inspired by Gandhi – “the light from the east” – when he developed his philosophy of “humanism.”¹⁴ In face of colonial intransigence and as Cold War interventionism intensified, many of these leaders would opt for armed struggle. Nkrumah would speak of a “people’s war,” as would the African Nation Congress and the FLN in Algeria. The liberation movements would achieve formal independence but soon transform themselves into repressive single-party regimes: the FLN in Algeria, PMLA in Angola, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, UNIP in Zambia, the Sudanese Socialist Union, the Democratic Party of Guinea and so on. These regimes would dominate their respective countries until the second wave of protests began in the 1980s.¹⁵

“Market Reforms”

In the late 1980s, as the global economic crisis deepened and cash-strapped developing states borrowed heavily, movements emerged to challenge the single-party state. These movements were partly inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political change that was blowing across Eastern Europe. In 1991, street protests gave way to a peaceful democratic transition in Zambia where Kenneth Kaunda peacefully ceded power to Frederick Chiluba. That same year, a coalition of labor activists and students would force the Malian military leader Musa Traoré to hold elections. Yet, as Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck have noted, the attempted transitions in Africa were not successfully consolidated as in Eastern Europe or Latin America, because of the African states’ weak institutional capacities and their acute dependence

13. Bill Sutherland and Matt Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan-African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle and Liberation* (Africa World Press 2000)

14. Kenneth David Kaunda, *Kaunda on Violence*, edited by Colin M. Morris (London, Collins, 1980)

15. Miles Larmer, “Social movement struggles in Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* (September 2010)

on external rents. Political movements were unable to sustain momentum, given the poorly institutionalized “hybrid” nature of African regimes that blended formal institutions with clientelism and patrimonial rule.¹⁶

This surge of protests did succeed in bringing about multi-party elections. Yet as critics have observed, elections also served to neutralize and incorporate popular protests into the state apparatus.¹⁷ Western scholars – often drawing on a European or American experience – have long envisaged civil society as an “agent of modernization” in Africa. As multi-party systems were introduced, many of the civil society organizations that had pushed for democracy in Africa now became NGOs or development agencies, a process some have termed the “NGO-ification” of the opposition.¹⁸ And what often occurred was that NGOs funded by Western donors would begin to deliver social services that the privatizing African state was unable or unwilling to provide; these third sector organizations became organs of state control, thereby thinning the ranks of the opposition.¹⁹ One influential CODESRIA study, in 1995, would presciently caution against the conflation of social movements with “civil society,” repudiating the Eurocentric observers for reproducing the totalizing, Western-based narrative of civil society, as it derives from modernization theory with its binary of tradition and modernity; many African social movements, the study argued, would not be recognized by modernization theory.²⁰

Elections paved the way for market reforms and structural adjustment programs that would inflict even more hardship on the lower classes. As the Ugandan economist, Jossy Bibangambah has observed about the adjustment policies of the 1990s: “on the one hand there is impressive economic performance and on the other there is deepening abject poverty, human deprivation, vulnerability and inadequate social services.”²¹ By the 2010s, economic stagnation and de-industrialization had

16. Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, “Hybrid social movements in Africa,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, (2013)

17. Caryn Peiffer and Pierre Englebert ‘Extraversion, vulnerability to donors, and political liberalization in Africa’, *African Affairs* 111 (444): 355–78 (2012)

18. Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan and Rafia Zakaria, *Emissaries of Empowerment*, The Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, The City College of New York (September 2017)

19. Julie Hearn, ‘The “Uses and Abuses” of Civil Society in Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy* (2001), pp. 43–53.

20. Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba eds., *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy* (Dakar: CODESRIA 1995)

21. Jossy R. Bibangambah, *Africa’s Quest for Economic Development: Uganda’s Experience* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers 2001) pp.128-129.

set in; as economist Joseph Stiglitz et al would note, the industrial output of the continent had shrunk to a smaller share than what it was in the 1970s.²²

“Africa Rising?”

Protests erupted again in the mid-2000s, this time in a context of continued austerity and War on Terror policies. As Mampilly and Branch have shown, between 2005-2014 over 90 popular protests occurred in 40 African states (not counting labor strikes and local labor strikes); and yet it was only when the revolts broke out in North Africa that Western media began to pay attention.²³ Several traits distinguish this most recent wave of protests. There was a clear urban character to the unrest, in part because nowadays 40 percent of Africa’s population is urban-based. This third wave also shows that there is no familiar or universal pathway to democracy (as scholars of “transitology” sometimes argue). Also, the African underclass’s ties – or lack of ties – to the state or political parties, may be a more useful lens to understanding the protests – than say elections or civil society politics. The youth leading “Occupy Nigeria” and “Walk to Work” in Uganda, as researchers have shown, were not members of political parties (which are tightly controlled), or civil society groups which are focused on issues (like “anti-corruption” and “good governance”) important to Western donors.

In short, if the anti-colonial movements coalesced around the goal of self-determination, and the second wave protests focused on the call for elections, the third wave has no unifying ideological vision yet. During the second wave, civil servants, workers and entrepreneurs who had forged a relationship with the post-colonial state mobilized to protest cuts in services and amenities, yet as structural adjustment deepened, these ties frayed – so that when protests erupted again in the mid-2000s, people in myriad African cities took to the streets demanding change – with no designated leaders, political organization or political programs; the demand was simply for total change.²⁴

As mentioned, the so-called “Arab spring” would inspire its own share of African protests. Writing in *The Ethiopian Times*, journalist Eskinder Nege would opine, “Ethiopians in Addis and across regions are mesmerized by events in

the Arab world as never before, and each dramatic twist of events seems to mischievously broaden the possibilities at home. More trouble than it could possibly handle is brewing for the EPRDF [Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front].”²⁵ Protests would spread southward rattling Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. In Malawi, protests against the rule of Bingu wa Mutharika would leave hundreds arrested and 18 dead. Mutharika would blame the opposition, and say protestors were “led by Satan.” Yet a cabinet reshuffle took place in August 2011 in response to the protests and to a freeze in financial assistance from the United Kingdom; the head of the army was also replaced. But in the presidential elections of 2014, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) would endorse Peter Mutharika (Bingu’s brother) who took office in May 2014.

“Divergent Motivations”

Analysts have had difficulty explaining this third wave of African protests, in part because of the (Western) focus on class structure, and the attendant belief that it is labor and/or the middle class that drives protest and democratic transitions.²⁶ Francis Fukuyama has argued that what was occurring in North Africa and the Middle East and elsewhere was a ‘middle class revolution’ against ineffective and unresponsive government.” In 2013, he wrote, that in Turkey and Brazil, as in Tunisia and Egypt before them, political protests “have been led not by the poor but by young people with higher-than-average levels of education and income.”²⁷ Numerous observers have made such argument about the expanded role of the “African middle class.” In 2011, for instance, the African Development Bank declared that the middle class in Africa had grown to 350 million people.²⁸ Yet this claim involved a definitional sleight of hand as the analysts included all people with daily consumption expenditures of more than \$2 – which barely allows for subsistence in urban areas. The reality is that across much of the African continent, the middle class remains small and dependent on state patronage. A more precise calculation of middle class status was offered by UNDP, whose reports argue that almost 50% of Africans live in extreme poverty, with

25. Eskinder Nega, “Libya’s Gadhafi and Ethiopia’s EPRDF,” *The Ethiopian Times* (February 25 2011)

26. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development & Democracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

27. Francis Fukuyama, ‘The Middle-Class Revolution’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2013

28. African Development Bank, *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, Market Brief, 20 (April 2011)

22. Joseph Stiglitz et al., *The Industrial Policy Revolution II: Africa in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Palgrave 2013)

23. See graph in Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (Zed Books 2015) p.54

24. *ibid*

inequality growing and with the middle class still being small and dependent.²⁹ Moreover, as mentioned, research shows that whether in Egypt, Nigeria, Burkina Faso or the DRC, protests were largely driven by youth from the underclass. In Tahrir Square, for instance, the presence of working class youth was often overlooked in favor of the social-media savvy middle class protestors.³⁰

The other oft-heard explanation for Africa's protests is that they were driven by a "new proletariat," an exploited class of workers that rose up against the neo-liberal project imposed by international financial institutions. There is an element of truth to this argument, austerity measures have inflicted economic hardship – but why has economic deprivation only triggered protest now? Moreover, the protests have not necessarily articulated an anti-privatization or anti-capitalism agenda; in fact, the protest coalitions have advanced no clear economic or political program. As historian Joel Beinin writes of Egypt, the "lack of political organization or program, indeed the distrust of what passed for 'politics'" in the Mubarak era by most Egyptians, meant that when Mubarak fell, they had no effective levers to shape the transition to the new regime."³¹ And this situation – the lack of a political program - has proved advantageous to the military in various countries.

How should these African protest coalitions with their hybrid class character be characterized? Are participants making economic or political demands? In her recently published book, *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*, political scientist Lisa Mueller maintains that there are two forces propelling the protests on the continent: "political grievances" among the middle class and "material grievances" among the poor. Using Afrobarometer survey data from 31 African countries and interviews she did with protest leaders in Malawi, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger, Mueller demonstrates that it is "political grievances" that determine when protests will occur, while it is "material grievances" that shape who is likely to take part in the protests. As she put it, the middle class tends to serve as the "generals of the revolution," while the poor function as the "foot soldiers of the revolution."³²

29. United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014, (New York: UN 2014)

30. Zeinab Abul-Magd, "Occupying Tahrir Square: the myths and the realities of the Egyptian revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111 (3) 2012

31. Joel Beinin, "Civil society, NGOs, and Egypt's 2011 popular uprising," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113 (2): 396–406 (2014)

32. Lisa Mueller, *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa* (Cambridge University Press 2018)

Despite different motivations, varied social groups have come together into these protest coalitions. In the case of Niger, Mueller notes how Western journalists and protest leaders described the 2009-2010 revolt in Niger as being about constitutional democracy, yet her survey of Nigerien citizens shows that economic grievance (rather than opposition to the head of state) played a greater role in individuals' decision to take to the streets. The variegated and evolving motivations for African protests, contends Mueller, can also be seen in the transmutation of protest slogans – as in the case of Senegal. In August 2012, the M23 opposition movement emerged in Dakar in 2012, to counter then-president Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to alter the constitution to stay in power. M23 initially mobilized people with the cry, "Don't touch my constitution." But as some protesting youth began burning tires – and even vendor stalls in Dakar – the poorest members of M23 began chanting a new slogan: "Don't touch my table, *Touche pas ma table.*"

Conclusion

Despite the repression, Africa's protests are ongoing. Regimes have managed, in some cases, to reclaim the public sphere; in others, the public sphere has been fundamentally changed. In Morocco, the Hirak protests of 2017, the economic boycotts of 2018, and the ongoing feminist #masaktach campaigns have dominated the media sphere and public discourse. Likewise, the "Walk to Work" protests of Uganda in 2011 may have been quelled, but in August 2018, protests started again calling for the freedom of musician and member of parliament Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine). Wine, whose song "Freedom" was taken off the air in 2017, is popular among the underclass, who refer to him as the "Ghetto President." And it is unemployed youth who are marching for his freedom, despite the newly-imposed social media tax which the government passed to discourage online organizing.³³ In the same vein, protests against new taxes in Nigeria triggered clashes between demonstrators and security forces prompting a wave of arrests. In Malawi, anti-corruption protests have taken place in various cities, led by a coalition called the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC). Despite the authoritarian crackdown, political agitation continues across the continent against overwhelming odds.

33. "Generation Gap," *African Arguments*, (August 23 2018)

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