



FPC Briefing: Africa Rising?

Will the popular rebellions in North Africa go south of the Sahara?

William Gumede

Many an African dictator is trembling in his (invariably dictators appear to be mostly men) boots following popular uprisings that swept long-time rulers out of power in Tunisia and Egypt.

Libyan people are rebelling against their ruler, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi – and he is fighting back violently. Gaddafi has ruled since 1969 when he took power in a coup, making him Africa's longest ruler.

Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF has prohibited state owned media from reporting the full extent of the Maghreb uprisings – presumably lest its own people get ideas from the citizen of Tunisia and Egypt. Robert Mugabe's government charged 45 students, trade unionists and activists with treason, accusing them of watching news videos of the uprising in Egypt and plotting to topple Zimbabwe's autocratic president.

Will the domino effect of these popular uprisings also sweep dictators out of power further south?

Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho and other Sub-saharan African countries are also ruled by long-time autocrats and their people are suffering as hard – if not harder – than those in Tunisia and Egypt.

In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe has been in power since 1980. In Cameroon Paul Biya has been in the saddle for 29 years. Yoweri Museveni has presided Uganda since 1986. Jose dos Santos has been in power since 1979, and is preparing to stand for another term – while, incredibly, grooming one of his children to take over. The list goes on.

There are some parallels, but also some clear differences, between societies in the north, and those South of the Sahara. The first parallel is that both the Maghreb countries and those South of the Sahara have allowed - in the words of South African Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan, "inequality to grow, allow(ed) joblessness to accelerate (and is) about state(s) that doesn't actually perform (and is) about a minority that accumulates things for itself".

All African countries are about to feel the delayed effect of the global financial crisis, just as Tunisia and Egypt had.

Typically in countries, like Swaziland, Lesotho or Cameroon, leaders pride themselves on the fact that they have supposedly not been so harshly affected by the recent global financial crisis. However, they are mistaken – the true effects are yet to be felt.

Many of those countries depend heavily on Western aid. With the austerity in most of the major donor countries this aid may either dry up, or drip into a trickle. Even the budgets of international organizations and NGOs heavily active in development projects in these countries have been cut or will be reduced. In some African countries more than 50% of the national budget comes from foreign aid.

Combined with a perceptible rise in the prices of basic food and living costs in most African countries, ordinary African people are having it tough. Desperation is easily turned into the political outrage. Just



last year, high bread prices cause violent riots in Maputo, Mozambique. With day to day living expected to become even worse, such riots may this year turn into full-blown uprisings against the ruling elites.

Like in Tunisia and Egypt, there is a deep gulf between the relatively small ruling elite, living a 'bling' and elite lifestyle, and a majority of the poor – a potent grievance, a festering sore if one happens to be the unfortunate poor individual.

The effect of the global financial crisis has also hit the relatively small middle classes in countries south of the Sahara, just as it also hit the Tunisian and Egyptian middle classes.

In Tunisia and Egypt the middle classes were also starting to feel the pinch of difficult economic circumstances. Generally in these regimes, the middle classes are locked into the system, and often have much too loose opposing it.

The combination of squeezed middle classes, the usually long-suffering poor working classes and the unemployed and underemployed youth are a potential explosive cocktail – also in the countries south of the Sahara.

The demography of all African countries has changed so dramatically since independence, so much so that young people now make up most of their populations, whether the country is south, or north of the Sahara. Young people were at the vanguard of the uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt.

Furthermore, young African people – those unemployed - now have generally higher levels of education, although in most cases, not with the kind of technical skills African economies now desperately need, compared to a generation ago.

Globalisation and new technological advances, such as the internet, social media, such as twitter, have meant that many people in Tunisia and Egypt, including the youth can see how better-off their peers in Western countries live, compared to them.

In most African countries most of the media is in state hands, so ruling parties can ensure news about official corruption, mismanagement or wrongdoing is kept out of the public domain.

Private media, where present, often does not have a wide reach. Furthermore, such private media is often also financially vulnerable. The state in many African countries still directly controls most of the economy – whether in North Africa or Africa south of the Sahara. And if they don't, they have indirect influence, through their ability to restrict private companies trading licenses, and so on, should they refuse to tow government lines.

This means in most African countries the state is still the biggest advertiser. If they are not, they can influence the private sector not to advertise in print, broadcast or electronic media they perceived to be critical of government – or risk losing government contracts or operating licenses.

Radio is the largest medium in Africa, including South Africa, but it is often controlled by governments. In many cases, independent FM radio is frequently only given licenses if they do not cover political issues. Although community radio is increasingly proliferating across the continent, they often also have



the same restrictions – or they just refrain from covering politics to stay on the good side of governments.

The news blackout in most African countries means that leaders and political movements can stay in power for longer without many of their supporters in the far-flung rural areas knowing the extent to which these leaders abuse their powers. This is why the likes of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe can get away with blaming his government's own bad governance on the work of Western 'imperialists', former colonial powers, minorities or opposition groups supposedly linked to them.

A flourishing private and independent media that conveys information to citizens about the corrupt activities of leaders and ruling parties, which is not conveyed to them by official media, plays a crucial role in informing citizens of what is really happening in their name. Not surprisingly, 'people power', the phenomenon where African citizens finally kick out bad governments that have ruled for far too long, often always coincides with the growth of private independent media– that can provide citizens (especially ordinary members of these parties) with the real story – and a growing civil and opposition movement, that can offer an alternative.

The rise of the internet, social media, the mobile phone, has meant there are now alternative means of communication outside that of the state-owned media.

In the uprisings against unpopular governments in Tunisia and Egypt, new social media, that can circumvent the official media, and the rise of independent media, such as Al Jazeera, has done the trick also.

Although the internet is not as widespread in many African countries south of the Sahara compared to Egypt or Tunisia, the power of the worldwide web is still potent. In Zimbabwe's last elections, people used mobile phones to text witnessed attempts at vote rigging by Zanu-PF strongmen at voting stations in remote areas. This meant that opposition groups, international observers and independent media could be informed more quickly than during previous elections.

Mobile phones are more promising among poorer Africans. This presents potential for the internet if most of these mobile phones can be made internet capable.

Furthermore, the potential to bringing news via the mobile phone is an attractive option for Africa.

So if a revolution is unlikely to arrive in most African countries south of the Sahara via the internet, it may arrive via the mobile phone.

In Egypt and Tunisia many young people and professionals in the past could migrate across the Mediterranean to Europe to seek better prospects. However, economic difficulties in most of Europe have meant that these countries blocked entry barriers for the young from Africa – the phenomenon of 'fortress' Europe.

It is also now more difficult for young Africans to seek greener pastures in Europe or the US. Of course countries neighbouring South Africa, such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, also have the option of exporting many of their young to relatively richer South Africa. Yet, South Africa itself has felt the brunt of the global financial crisis – all this after leaders initially claimed the country rode the storm. Last year



more than one million people lost their jobs. In spite of all the talk by politicians that they will create millions of jobs this year: looking at their plans it becomes quickly clear this is half-baked and mere wishful thinking. The opposite appear more likely; more people will lose their jobs this year.

South Africa is also now tightening entry barriers for those looking for jobs from neighbouring countries. This will force the unemployed young at home – where they could become a potent force for change.

One big difference between Egypt and Tunisia compared to other African countries south of the Sahara, is that there are more incidents of staged elections in the latter which on regular occasions give the masses an outlet for their frustrations.. The recent presidential and parliamentary elections held in Uganda springs to mind.

Furthermore, the opposition parties in these countries are so irrelevant – little alternative policies, and generally clones of the ruling parties and each other (the opposition political parties in Nigeria are a good example); they are more of a stumbling bloc to genuine democracy than anything else.

In the Ivory Coast presidential election that took place last November strongman Laurent Gbagbo lost against Alassane Quattara, but still insists he won. Whoever finally becomes president, there is very little, if any, differences between their policy platforms or even the outlook of the two – so it will in real terms be more of the same.

Most of Africa's dictators are of course being propped by Western giants or the new Eastern powers, such as China, in exchange for oil, minerals or for strategic geopolitical reasons – Kenya is a good example. Zimbabwe recently stated that China's Development Bank will pump in up to USD \$10 billion of investment in the country's mining and agriculture sector, a big boost for Mugabe political survival.

Over the past few years, Tunisia's supposed economic 'miracle' – in spite of political autocracy - was toasted by multilateral organizations and Western powers. Egypt was a strategic focus for the US and the regime there was flush with foreign aid.

Even Libya joined the US-led "war of terror" and became an ally of Western powers – which shored up Gaddafi's powers ahead of the recent rebellion against his rule by ordinary citizens of Libya.

It is instructive when US President Barack Obama pulled the plug on Egypt the regime caved in. Many African countries south of the Sahara have in the past either like Swaziland, kept on the right side of the US, by claiming they are partners in the 'fight against terror', or have been kept in power, by financial support from China (who needs their minerals), as is the case of Zimbabwe, or South Africa (in Zimbabwe because of historical ties as a fellow liberation movement).

Long-time strongmen Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia have been the darlings of the West, in spite of their autocratic behaviour. Recently Ethiopian economists and scholars wrote an open letter to Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, who is close to Meles Zenawi, to distance himself from the autocrat.

Most African regimes – whether north or south of the Sahara - have been in power because the army has been loyal to them. These regimes have generally showered the army with largesse to keep them onside. With difficult economic times ahead it will prove increasingly hard to keep feeding these armies.



Furthermore, in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia once it became clear, to the army, that the regimes had lost the support of powerful overseas backers, they changed allegiances, or at least remained neutral.

In countries south of the Sahara, the army still remains a formidable obstacle. That is why in countries, like Zimbabwe, in order to bring about change, the army may have to be bought off, or at least given enough incentives, for example amnesty and job security, to remain neutral.

Tunisia and Egypt are countries that are relatively ethnically homogenous. Except for perhaps, Swaziland and Lesotho, most countries south of the Sahara are ethnically diverse. More importantly, in most of these countries unscrupulous political leaders and parties have played off different ethnic groups against each other to remain in power, or did so on the back of the most dominant ethnic group, or by forming ethnic alliances.

This means that in many African south of the Sahara countries, people often perceived their problems in the context of the fact that they are in the 'wrong' ethnic group, rather than blaming it on their bad leaders or governments, no matter the ethnicity. Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Kenya are cases in point.

Finally, in some African countries south of the Sahara, parties of liberation and independence are still in power. Many supporters vote for them mostly on the credentials they acquired as a result of their struggles for independence.

The youth in many countries south of the Sahara, where liberation or independence movements are still in power, are often mobilized by youth wings of these ruling movements. The youth leagues are often allowed to be more radical by the founding liberation and independence movements, in order to periodically disperse popular anger among the youth. A good case is the ANC Youth League, and its leader Julius Malema or Zimbabwe's Zanu-PF, Mozambique's Frelimo or Angola's MPLA youth wings.

In African countries ruled by independence/liberation movements, the number of youth participating in civil movements outside these leagues is small – though not insignificant.

Youth, like their senior activist predecessors, may protest against incumbent liberation/independence movement now in governments, but still see these movements as the parties of liberation and independence.

Angry youth in such cases are not demanding for these liberation/independence movement governments to be removed, but for them to improve the way they govern – or to allow them to share the spoils of government also. As the demography of most African countries is increasingly becoming younger, these credentials independence/struggle credentials are wearing thin.

This changing demographic means many young people have little if any memory of yesterday's liberation struggle. And very soon, young voters will have no recollection of the anti-apartheid or the anti-colonial struggle, and may not simply vote for ruling parties because of their historical liberation movement record. This may herald the kind of youth-led rebellions seen in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Revolution south of the Sahara may not come immediately, but it is certainly on its way.

The Foreign Policy Centre

Progressive Thinking for a Global Age



William Gumede is Honorary Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public and Development, University of the Witwatersrand. His forthcoming book, *The Democracy Gap, Africa's Wasted Years*, is released in 2011.