

Africans Rising against *Africa Rising*

Von Patrick Bond

Since 2010, the combination of austerity, dictatorial regimes, socio-political injustice and ecological stresses created conditions in Africa, which have generated a new wave of protests across the continent. These protests relate to various dispossessions: wages and working conditions, state capture by elites, service delivery, civil liberties, land grabs, pollution and the like. According to a 2013 measurement by the African Development Bank (AfDB), which is based on Agence France Press journalistic data, major public protests rose from an index level of 100 in 2000 to nearly 450 in 2011 and 520 in 2012, including Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Egypt, Gabon, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia and Uganda (AfDB et al. 2013). In 2013, the index rose further to 550 (AfDB et al. 2014).

This is the era of 'Africa Risings.' Many mainstream commentators believe that by following the extraction-centric export-oriented route that raised Gross Domestic Product (GDP) levels at a more rapid rate when commodity super-cycle began in 2002, hundreds of millions of Africans graduate pushed into a middle-class status. Given China's and India's demands for its raw materials, there is hope that Africa will grow wealthy (e.g., Perry 2012, Robertson 2013). But the contradictions generated by such assessment are intense, partly because this kind of analysis leaves out non-renewable resource depletion, ignores climate change, or defines middle-class as per daily consumption worth only \$2-20 (Bond 2011).

As a result, it is fair to observe the beginnings of a Polanyian 'double-movement', in Africa around 2010, as it has been defined by Karl Polanyi (1944) in *The Great Transformation*, and includes i.e. excessive market penetration of society countered by social activism.. The increase in uprisings began in the three North African countries and resulted into regime changes resulted within a year. However, there is also evidence of increasing protest south of the Sahara, including in South Africa's platinum mines where the Marikana massacre of August 2012 was one result, and in December 2013 the cleavage of the largest trade union (the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) from the ruling party was another.

But one central challenge remains in most African countries: can nascent economic justice movements follow the Latin American road in which IMF Riots during the 1980s paved the way for more sustained construction of social movements which channelled activism more effectively, and even led to changes in government? Aside from ongoing progressive mobilisations in Egypt and Tunisia in reaction to IMF and fundamentalist Islamic repression, South Africa is the only country in which that process is apparent, with some scope for linking between interests of poor and working-class people and establishing a workers' party in the foreseeable future (Bond 2014).

Indeed the potential remains great. According to the AfDB et al (2013), "Public protests in North Africa in 2012 had a political undertone that reflected an extension of the Arab Spring revolts. The protests were primarily motivated by calls for further and deeper political reforms [...]. Protests in sub-Saharan Africa were mostly over economic concerns. More than half of public protests were to demand salary increases or to complain against the increasing cost of living." In 2011, the AfDB added, "nearly all African countries faced increased protests" while the 2012 experiences were concentrated in fewer, larger countries.

The most recent discussion of African uprising by the African Development Bank (2014) documents how “Public protests increased in Africa in 2013, with limited economic opportunities and unemployment as the two key factors driving social unrest.” In North Africa, protests continued over “the slow pace of reforms that led to the Arab Spring uprisings,” given that compromise governments were still failing to deliver the ‘bread, freedom and social justice’ demanded. Across the continent, “demands for higher salaries accounted for a quarter of the public protests recorded [...]. While slow [political] reforms caused public protests in many Africa countries, in others they were mainly to show anger at poor services or wage levels.”

1. South Africa revolts, again

In South Africa alone, the number of *violent* protests in the year 2012-13 was 1882, as recorded by police, with nearly 10,500 additional non-violent *Gatherings Act* incidents. There, police minister Nathi Mthethwa (2013) observed that “Over the past four years, a total of 46,180 protests were attended to and all were successfully stabilized, with 14,843 arrests effected” – although debate continues on how successful the police were in Marikana, as a result of irrefutable evidence (most supplied from their own computers after clumsy cover-ups) that their massacre of mineworkers was premeditated, and entailed planting of weapons on mineworker corpses. Nationally, it is difficult to identify decisive trends and correlate these to particular political causalities, but it is evident that a higher level of violent incidents occurred after 2008, perhaps due to a combination of global economic crisis (leaving more than one million South Africans newly unemployed) and the rise in electricity prices of 128 percent that occurred over the subsequent four years.

The varied nature of these local gatherings renders them difficult to quantify, but according to official police *crowd management* statistics, there were 8,905 incidents in the period 2009/2010, 1,008 of them classified *unrest* incidents. There were 12,654 incidents in the period 2010/2011, 973 of them classified *unrest* incidents. There were furthermore 11,033 incidents in the 2011/2012 period (as of April 2012) and 1,091 of these are classified *unrest* as opposed to *peaceful*. In the case of *unrest* incidents the police intervene (often using force) when they perceive threats to security or damage to property. *Peaceful* incidents are defined as those where there is co-operation between the police and the convener and no police intervention is necessary. The many more incidents of protest where there are fewer than 15 people are recorded by the police, as such events are considered not applicable under the Gatherings Act (yet in many cases, larger protests occur with participants placing themselves in groups of 14 or more at a 50 meter distance in the event they did not obtain police permission) (Bond/Mottiar, 2013).

Data of this sort should be considered valid only insofar as reliable trends can be discerned, and this is a matter of subjectivity when it comes to protest, given that definitions vary dramatically and that those recording the events – especially Agence France Press journalists – do so in a manner that fluctuates over time. Protests become regular and hence no longer of news value. In 2013, more sophisticated cartographic representations and correlations to media databases became available, even if the Africa protest records found in northern press reports are a small fraction of what was happening on the ground. Political scientist John Beieler mapped major protest events for the first eight months of the year, including on a month-by-month basis. Again, the undercounting is a serious problem, but the diversity of protest sites in Africa is revealing nevertheless.

2. Diversity of causes

No representative research studies exist to this date, which is why the rest of this contribution relies mainly on qualitative analysis. However, it is worth considering at least one of several causal vectors, namely the rise in food prices, as direct correlations between prices and food riots have been observed (Arezki/Brückner 2011; Berazneva/Lee 2013; Schneider 2008). There are many other areas in which similar correlations could be established, such as for instance in the case of climate, which the Pentagon-funded Robert Strauss Institute at the University of Texas-Austin's work is focused on, which will be discussed in the next section.

Another causal vector that will continue to take effect is the traditional class struggle. The ability to move labour from micro-shopfloor and industry-level demands to national policy will be crucial to Africa's future uprisings. For optimists, the World Economic Forum's September 2013 *Global Competitiveness Report* demonstrated that Africa's labour protesters are by far the most militant in the world, even if not yet the most effective. In one questionnaire given to a representative sample of corporate managers, the topic of *Cooperation in labour-employer relations* is quantified on a scale of 1 to 7, from "generally confrontational" to "generally cooperative". The mean for the world's working classes was 4.3, i.e. with a bias towards quiescence. The table reveals the results from 148 countries, of which 39 are African: northern and Asian workers are most pliable, and African (especially South African) are most militant. Of the 39 African countries surveyed, 30 were higher than (or at) the world mean level of militancy. South Africa was by far the most militant working class, for the second year in a row.

In addition to movements that seek to democratise societies, which invariably draw on and compel further struggles for socio-economic justice, countless micro-struggles continue. These include community campaigns to preserve natural resources and reconsider the merits of extractive industries (especially minerals, fossil fuels and river sources), in places like the Niger Delta, Zimbabwe's diamond fields and South Africa's platinum and titanium belts. Others are national initiatives of labour and its allies to meet basic needs and balance local economies through domestic (*import-substitution*) production, with South Africans the most active, as will be concluded. Finally, there are numerous struggles associated with serious Islamic or other religious-based insurgencies, in not only Egypt but Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia (AfDB 2013). Aside from occasional condemnations of US imperialism in Africa, usually these faith-based civil conflicts do not feature in mainstream discourses of African citizenries' uprising against injustice. But as long as chaos reigns in large swathes of Africa, groups like The Lord's Resistance Army, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab will continue to prosper.

3. Specific African uprisings

The reproduction of Africa's exploitative trade, finance, investment and labour-migration relations within crisis-ridden world capitalism has been met with sustained – albeit still uncoordinated and largely ineffectual – resistance, as became evident from the previous discussion of data based evidence. This is especially true in North Africa, where counter-revolution prevailed in most countries. Since the Washington Consensus narrative was left unchanged in all important respects, contradictions became more polarized. Initially, for example, there was even awareness in Egypt's military that neoliberal reforms carried out by Mubarak were responsible for the revolts insofar as they compelled a core working-class constituency – independent trade unions – to narrate their struggles in political terms. This was conceded in May 2011 by no less a figure than Major General Mohammed al-Assar of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, who claimed: "The military brass were deeply opposed to the privatisation programme. That in turn

eased their decision to side with the Egyptian public against the 30-year autocratic rule of Mubarak. Al-Assar told state television on Wednesday that the army has been against the “plans to sell Egypt” and viewed them as a threat to social peace” (Mekay 2011).

However, it is equally certain that the counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt, including the army leadership that regained power in 2013, would not be able to deliver the socio-economic progress demanded in Tahrir Square. Strikes and protests were promptly banned. With class struggles constantly erupting as part of the process, Samir Amin (2011) celebrated the earlier basis of the movements: “The workers’ strikes in 2007 (the most enduring strikes on the African continent in the past fifty years), the stubborn resistance of small farmers threatened with expropriation by agrarian capital, and the formation of democratic protest groups among the middle classes (like the Kefaya and April 6 movements) anticipated the inevitable explosion – which was expected by Egyptians but seemed startling to foreign observers.”

Under IMF dictates to repay Mubarak’s \$33 billion debt, the army leadership (even with an electoral mandate expected in 2014) will not be able to deliver the socio-economic progress demanded in Tahrir Square. Once the dust settles on the fully-militarised new government, ensuring protest are to be expected for many years to come.

What lessons would be drawn for other country-specific protesters, including the ways to spark rapid and profound revolts that facilitate the removal of a dictator from power with at least temporary support from the military? Perhaps the most acute observer of the potential for emancipation in Africa is Sokari Ekine (2011), who follows the continent’s blogs at the weekly *Pambazuka News*. Her mid-2011 review of developments in several countries is revealing: “Uganda, Swaziland, Kenya, and Botswana actions are in response to concerns over food security, rising unemployment particularly amongst youth, political marginalisation, corruption of government officials and a pushback against the entrenched leadership of the circle of *rulers for life*. Military dictators have been replaced by democracy dictatorships under militarised states.”

Eastern Africa was typical of the resulting fusion of neoliberalism and repression. In Kampala, wrote Ekine (2011), “The government has blamed inflation on external factors out of their control, obviously believing Ugandans are so ill-informed as not to make the connection between the \$740 million spent on fighter jets and tanks [...]. Museveni who, in a show of militarism, chose to wear military fatigues during the recent swearing in of MPs, complained that his guests, President Kabila of the DRC and Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, were pelted with stones by people.” In Nairobi, Ekine (2011) reported, “Grassroots movements such as *Bunge La Mwananchi* [The People’s Parliament] and the *Unga Revolution* [a collection of civil society groups including Bunge La Mwananchi] campaigning for economic and social rights have been formed in response to the rising cost of living and loss of social benefits.”

The same dynamic was observed in Southern Africa. In Manzini, “The Swazi pro-democracy uprisings which began on 12 April were met with beatings, teargas and hundreds of arrests. Many of the protesters were driven 100 miles into the country where they were dumped by the police. Student leader Maxwell Dlamini and Musa Ngubeni of the Swaziland Youth Congress were arrested, tortured and remain in detention.’ In Gaborone, ‘Botswana, much revered in the west as ‘Africa’s success story’, public sector workers – transport, schools, clinics and government staff – began striking on 18 April. The ruling party has been in power for 45 years and people are calling for a change. The leader of the opposition, Duma Boko has called for an Egypt-style uprising’ (Ekine, 2011). In Harare in February 2011, Robert Mugabe’s forces arrested 45 attendees of

an International Socialist Organisation Zimbabwe meeting who were viewing footage from Tahrir Square and Tunisia.

West Africa had similar issues but more success with country-specific and demand-specific protesting. In Dakar, Senegal's well-respected mass movements rose up in June 2011, burning down the country's national electricity building and tax authority. They protested at cabinet ministers' houses to enforce both a resolution of the energy crisis and a withdrawal of President Abdoulaye Wade's proposed legislation that would have seen him extend his neoliberal political rule. This protest was successful, as was the January 2012 *Occupy Nigeria* national demonstrations against the doubling of the fuel price mandated by IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde, who had visited Nigeria a few days earlier. Millions of Nigerians took to the streets as an eight day strike cost \$1.3 billion in output. It quickly became evident to President Goodluck Jonathan that he would have to concede on the socio-economic front, or be ousted from power.

This degree of anger must, at some stage, result in a more effective Polanyian double movement than has happened to date. The earlier era of protests – in the form of IMF Riots – did not derail neoliberalism in Africa, even though after the debt crisis got underway in the early 1980s, World Bank president A.W. Clausen (1983) was worried enough to tell a board meeting, "We must ask ourselves: How much pressure can these nations be expected to bear? How far can the poorest peoples be pushed into further reducing their meager standards of living? How resilient are the political systems and institutions in these countries in the face of steadily worsening conditions? I don't have the answers to these important questions." More recently, the world's elites have been aware of the potential for more sustained critique, for in 2011, the IMF's then managing director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was asked by a journalist, "Do you have any fears that there is perhaps a far left movement coming through these revolutions that want more, perhaps, closed economies? I mean, there have been a lot of pictures of Guevara there." His answer:

Good question. Good question. There's always this risk, but I'm not sure it will materialize. Look, during the global financial crisis we went just through, at the beginning many were afraid of the possibility of an increase in protectionism. It didn't happen. Why? Because, I think, that most governments, maybe not all of them, but most governments and most people, man on the street, have understood that there was no good solution in this direction (International Monetary Fund 2011).

To make the case that we need not worry about Africans inspired by Che – whose mid-1960s fight against Mobutu alongside (briefly) the father of current DRC president Joseph Kabila, was utterly miserable – Strauss-Kahn used as a proxy *protectionism*. In the case of South Africa, normally amongst Africa's most aggressively neoliberal regimes, Strauss-Kahn should have been worried, for in 2009, a Communist Party member, Rob Davies, was made trade minister, and by 2013 he had begun widespread cancellation of free trade deals, and even imposed an 82 percent tariff on import of Brazilian chickens. The *domestic solution* Strauss-Kahn despises is also to be found in the re-imposition of capital controls, defaults on Odious Debt, state-directed investment and favorable interest rates (Asian *developmental state*-style), Keynesian reflation and more social spending. Gaining steam, these strategies lead *The Economist* to introduce its 12 October 2013 special issue on the world economy with the worrisome headline "The Gated Globe".

What the IMF leader should also have considered was a deeper set of critical reactions to the era of African neoliberalism in which financialisation has fused with extractivist accumulation, and in which the *Africa Rising* argument is increasingly revealed as far from the truth. If so, then

the *far left movement* seeking *closed economies* – i.e., those protected from especially the ravages of deregulated global finance – would find a much more compelling Polanyian double movement which has emerged in civil (and often uncivil) society. As we have seen, the resistance stiffened especially in the beginning of 2011. This is true not only in North Africa where socio-economic grievances were central to understanding revolts in even the (neo-liberally) best-performing of African countries, Tunisia, but also in Sub-Saharan Africa, where after years of ineffectual IMF riots, growing unrest was observed in crucial sectors and geographical spaces from Senegal in the west, to Uganda in the centre and to Swaziland in the south. Most crucially, the South African bottom-up rupture with the African neoliberal-nationalist script is worth following; indications in late 2013 are that connectivity can be found in sites of grassroots and labour struggle, offering hope for stronger alliances of poor and working people than we have ever known here, perhaps also beyond South Africa's borders. A February 2014 General Strike call against the South African finance ministry – on Budget Day speech in parliament – would be one indication of the ability of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) to reach downwards into the unemployed and especially youth, for support and linkage to the communities' service delivery protests.

If such protests can coagulate and move from local to national to continental to global scales in coming years, what would they be potentially articulating, as an antidote to *Africa Rising* rhetoric? According to Jumoke Balogun (2013), "African governments hold the solution to a more equitable society. By closing the skills gap, initiating a more progressive corporate tax system, and providing subsidies for public services that protect the bottom percentile, many countries can begin to turn the tide."

Further words of counsel are provided by Ama Biney (2013), *Pambazuka News* editor:

Ultimately, fundamental to Africa genuinely 'rising' must be a critical examination of what this 'rising' will entail. What kind of development do we envisage for Africa? Does it only lie in economic development and progress? What about social and cultural development? What about the psyche and aesthetics that a people adhere and aspire to? What kind of economic development will ensure that the economy is controlled by the greatest number of ordinary people rather than the minority?

The answer can come only if these myriad protests across Africa find the kind of expression in social movements, labour organisations and then unifying left political parties as they did elsewhere over the last 150 years at least. The 1864 meeting of the First International of working-class people in London was the beginning of a process in which these linkages could be drawn, and acted upon. The 1848 revolutions showed the similarity of European class-forming processes and early resistances to capitalism. Today, the availability of mass media, social media and electronic linkages between uprisings offer a more rapid route to a genuine PanAfricanism from below, even if such attempts appear remote. So too did the prospect of linking prospects at national level in early 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt, but once the word is out, that the 1% are vulnerable, the 99% can occupy critical public spaces and overthrow governments.

Let's thus return to our early question: can economic justice movements in Africa follow a more recent road, along which Latin American anti-austerity protests, which became mass-democratic social movements and then, to ensure the Tunisian and Egyptian denouements do not reoccur, genuine leftist political parties that might take power? Such roads often begin as small paths in the distant countryside. As Zachariah Mampilly (2013) shows in his survey of rural-urban links in Eastern Congo, South Sudan and Darfur, Northern Nigeria, and Northern Uganda, there are

“complex ties between the largely urban protest movements and the primarily rural conflicts that continue to bedevil many of Africa’s largest countries.” The relations that drive what appear to be geographically-segregated, peripheral phenomena such as the Lord’s Resistance Army, Boko Haram, Ansar Dine or Al Shabaab are in turn inevitably refracted in urban angst and ultimately protest, Mampilly insists.

Biney (2013) concludes, “At the moment it seems the type of development the *Africa is rising* evangelists envisage is that which Fanon warned us against: an imitation of Europe and a desire to catch up with Europe. There appears little desire or will to seek an alternative to capitalism, one that is centred on the ideas and interests of ordinary people.” That must change, she concludes, as we may too: “If Africa is to rise, it must heed Thomas Sankara and “dare to invent the future” based on a new egalitarian economic system that centres people before profits and in which ordinary people critically control the production of what they produce and how they produce it.”

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