

Report

The Arab Revolution Goes to Southern Africa

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"Never has humanity combined so much power with so much disorder, so much anxiety with so many playthings, so much knowledge with so much uncertainty."
(Paul Valéry, "Historical Fact", 1932)

The Arab Spring was not a spontaneous reaction. It didn't just suddenly "spring up" from nowhere. Politicians and their backers often try to distort revolutions by claiming that they are chaotic events organised by youth who opt to be idle, then restless and eventually lawless. To a South African youth struggling to gain university entrance to the point of being trampled on in a stampede of five thousand others scurrying to grab the same opportunity(1), or a Swati youth eating cow dung so that she can take her ARV medication without the treatment eroding her stomach(2), or a DRC youth suffering through or forcibly committing sexual terrorism acts, the adoption of the Arab Revolution as courageously carried out by Arab youth is not an unreasonable option. In fact, it may be the only mechanism left to Southern Africa's youth to effect political change in their lives and countries.

This is what the Arab youth have done: they have given their Southern African counterparts an option. As the protests in 2011 raged on in the Middle East and continue to do so to date, a need for similar action mostly in the SADC states was debated. What would happen if an Arab Spring model were to be adopted by SADC youth? What kind of resistance would SADC youth face if they were to replay an Arab Revolution in their countries? Is the situation in the SADC region similar to that of the Arab states that it would call for electoral, parliamentary and constitutional reforms such as those in Tunisia and Egypt? Has the frustration with entrenched and corrupt power and its establishments mounted to a point where a measure as drastic as a revolution is necessary in Southern Africa?

In order to answer these questions honestly, it must be acknowledged that political scientists, politicians, citizens and international bodies such as the United Nations have a limited understanding of change. They had a limited understanding of change when communism fell, when the structures of colonialism and apartheid were dismantled in the 1960s and 1980s, when America was reduced to the world's most vulnerable state in the world on 9/11, and even when the global economic crisis hit in 2008. The world watched as Tunisians bitterly mourned the painful and undeserved death of the brave youth, Mohammed Bouazizi, but the world didn't see that on that very day, the season for change had come.

This change did not only sweep through Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria but also to every country whose youth had been betrayed and neglected by their governments. This wave movement was so powerful and swift that in its wake it caused Sultanate regime leaders to flee, as in the case of Ben Ali; and Western allies were seen playing "catch-up" to the revolution and taking a backseat to the will of the people, as a bewildered Obama did in Egypt and a flustered UN Security Council is doing in Syria.

Arab and SADC Youth: Common Struggle and a Common Vision

The developed nations were not immune to protests for socio-economic justice as evidenced by the "Occupy Movements" in the United States nor were developing states excluded from the rapidly changing global political landscape, as Nigerians also launched their own fight against their government's amputation of fuel subsidisation. The 2011 explosions happened in North Africa and the Middle East but the tremor was felt throughout the world. None of the people who manipulated the world's political and economic systems would be prepared for the aftershocks which to this day still rattle their delusions about being ordained as the custodians of absolute power.

Angola, Swaziland, Malawi, Zimbabwe, the DRC and even South Africa are some of the states in the SADC region which had its citizens express their dissatisfaction with their governments in the form of Arab-style protests. It is no coincidence that the events in North Africa and the Middle East were almost mirrored by those in Southern Africa, the poorest region in the world. These regions may be vastly different in their geopolitics, religion and cultures but they share common ground in the way their lives have been

compromised by the neopatrimonial and greedy regimes which have ruled them for many decades. They share the socio-economic and political conditions which set the scene for revolution.

Swaziland's absolute monarchy, like that of Bahrain, amalgamates public and private entities and controls them with impunity and unchallenged by citizens or political parties. Any dissenting individual voice or political group is crushed swiftly and brutally before anyone knew it ever existed. Although President Mugabe's rule over Zimbabwe is not classified as a monarchy, it has the same characteristic of the Swati and Bahrain kingdoms. It is perpetual or at least, seeks to be. Angola and the DRC's hereditary presidencies of Dos Santos and Kabila, respectively, also bear a striking resemblance to those of the Arab governments. These states have over time set the scene for the uprisings which they now witness and try to mute by marginalising their own people from any form political participation. They also continue to ignore the need for the formation of democratic constitutions and independent judicial institutions.

Libya's Gaddafi, although equally monstrous in maintaining his grip on power, would at least buy his people's silence and obedience by supplying key services such as food, electricity, cheap fuel products, housing subsidies and free education (however, not the kind of education that could ultimately cause them to criticise and eventually unseat him from power). If "buying power" is what earned Gaddafi 42 years in the highest seat in the land, then Mugabe, Dos Santos, Kabila and Bingu wa Mutharika, King Moswati and yes, even the ANC government have run out of time. The desperate need for decent employment and basic services has rightfully been at the heart of protests in the SADC region. When rudimentary needs far outweigh delivery, as it has been in most SADC states, then the scene for unrest is once again set.

In South Africa, of all places, the government's ability to maintain its citizens' human dignity was put to the test by the "Toilet Protests" of 2011; which were held by impoverished communities. These communities demonstrated against the construction of toilets which had no walls enclosing them and were also positioned in the middle of the streets, forcing people to cover themselves with blankets when using them. This kind of scene is not only uncomfortable to write about but also extremely infuriating and disgusting to imagine. As severe as that situation is, it is still only a microcosm of a much bigger problem facing poor populations all over the SADC states.

The gap between the rich minority and the poor masses is growing bigger by the day leaving people either trying to claw their way into the small privileged inner circle by any means necessary or disgruntled and committing crime in order to survive and also frustrate the functioning of state systems. Rampant corruption in government departments has been a major cause of high rates of unemployment as well as the breakdown of service delivery, and law and order.

Technological "Playthings": A Common Weapon for Arab and SADC Youth

The fierce service delivery strikes in South Africa, the blood mineral trade in the DRC, illegal arms trafficking in Angola, the scourge of HIV/AIDS in Swaziland, the non-existence of human security in Zimbabwe and the turbulent protests by Malawians over fuel shortages, to name a few, have been a direct consequence of poverty. Economic hardships in Southern Africa have been met with the same amount of frustration as in the Arab states. There is nothing as dangerous as divesting from a country's youth because those are the people who are supposed to resuscitate the economies of their countries. And they are the people who can render power illegitimate with just a click of a button or icon. Disarming youth by making even the most basic of human needs exclusive to only an elite few can only result in arming them with the bravery they need to show the world the truth about their bloodthirsty governments as they have done on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The youth are clearly not as ill-informed as politicians have thought them to be. A "dumbing down" society has been one of the tools of survival for corrupt regimes. A

citizenry unable to reason beyond its next social welfare cheque is exactly what these incompetent governments depend on to extend their existence. When the people are “awakened”, the dismantling of corrupt state systems begins. Social media technologies have been powerful portals of knowledge for Arab and Southern African youth. Very few youth in SADC can claim that they have never seen a cell phone or do not know how to use it. The rapid exchange of information has been significant in the youth organising themselves politically. Now they use it to effect political transformation. The Arab and subsequently Southern African governments caught on to this fact, but did so late as the international community had already been alerted to the aims of the youth.

Facebook, Twitter and Youtube really have contributed to crippling governments by taking away one other crutch which helps regimes to maintain order or rather, political apathy among citizens: disorganising and censoring people through state secrecy policies. If the people don’t know anything about how state funds and resources are being (mis)appropriated, what complaints could they possibly have to voice? As flawed as globalisation is, for enlightening the youth about their counterparts in countries they might never even visit in their lifetime and helping the youth to organise themselves politically, it deserves a round of applause.

The Cell Phone is Mightier than the Rifle: Arab and SADC Youth Defeating the Military

Certainly, governments have tried to ban the internet but this has still been to no avail as technologically savvy youth have found ways to sidestep the governments and all its underhanded, heavy-handed tactics to silence dissident voices. The only devices that are left to governments in Arab and Southern African regions to stabilise their masses are violence, which they are making full use of, and simply listening, which they reject.

The military, as in the case of Syria and Bahrain has been turned on the citizenry. This has resulted in heavy shelling and unjustified detainment of innocent and peaceful demonstrators. The iron fist of Bashar Al Assad has been mimicked by Mugabe, who imprisoned 46 people for allegedly planning an Egyptian-style protest over a social media website.⁽³⁾ In South Africa, during a service delivery protest, unarmed Andries Tatane, a teacher and well-respected community leader was bludgeoned and shot to death by a mob of police. In Malawi, the fuel shortage and food price hike demonstrations, also held in 2011 like those in Zimbabwe and South Africa, were shut down by state security forces when they killed, injured and arrested protesters.

In unstable non-democratic states, where youth are seeking to change such systems into stable democratic ones, the military has a choice to either protect the citizens or carry out the instructions of a murderous government ruling on borrowed time. In Libya and Egypt, defections from the military inspired greater courage among protestors to continue their fight for democracy, but later unfortunately as in the case of Egypt, the army proved its loyalty to still be with the former regime as it started abusing protestors. In Libya, a sizeable portion of Gaddafi’s army still remains loyal to him and his assassination forms fertile ground for resentment and revenge.

In Southern Africa, none of the state security forces even considered shifting their loyalty to youth fighting for economic freedom and security, which military personnel would also enjoy. A reason for this may not be that military personnel are not frustrated by their inefficient, incompetent governments but rather that they are desperate to hang on to what little job security the government provides them with. Most Southern African army personnel have not had access to higher education and have no other marketable skills, so protecting their government is protecting their bread. In the Arab states, much uncertainty lies beyond the revolution. It is difficult to determine which side will put bread on your table the following day.

An Arab-style Revolution in Southern Africa: Far-Fetched or Possible?

Considering the similarity in the circumstances faced by Arab and Southern African youth, it is safe to predict a revolution in at least Angola, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Swaziland

and the DRC. In South Africa, democratic “buffers” such as the Office of the Public Protector (which investigates government maladministration), the Constitutional Court (which fights for its autonomy), a parliament (which is representative of women and even former apartheid administrators in the name of reconciliation), a well-developed and vibrant media, small but growing opposition parties, a constitution that is lauded as the best in the world, and trade unions that never fail to check the government and criticise it whenever necessary, may postpone the revolution but not cancel it.

ANC government leaders are in the middle of their watershed moment where they can choose to do right by their citizens and abandon all the anti-democratic policies and practices they have crafted and indulged in, namely the Protection of Information Bill, RICA legislation, the nepotistic awarding of jobs and unethical tender processes. South Africa can delay and even prevent a revolution if it exercises an unrelenting political will to do so. However, the same cannot be said for its Angolan, Zimbabwean, Malawian and Swati neighbours; whose citizens continue to flee their countries only to become refugees in South Africa. With such problems, how can SADC leaders not foresee the potential of revolutions arresting (or maybe freeing) Southern Africa like they have in the Arab states?

The answer to this is simple: SADC leaders are too busy looking at the “bottom line” which they still believe to be cold, hard cash. The awakening of the Arab youth has caused an awakening of Southern African youth, and with that the bottom line has also changed. The bottom line is no longer what makes Chinese and Western investors happy and who between them is the highest bidder for Southern Africa’s natural resources. The bottom line now is the youth who are more valuable than crude and diamonds.

African and Arab youth have started a new conversation about their futures and their countries. This is a conversation that the men and women in the corridors of power never bothered to engage in. And so the point at the beginning of this paper must be reiterated for Southern African leaders: what is happening among youth is not a result of naïve youngsters choosing to be idle, then restless and eventually lawless. What is happening is a conversation sparked by youth and that conversation is called revolution.

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Notes

1. This is in reference to the tragedy that took place at the University of Johannesburg in January 2012, where a stampede erupted after an estimated five thousand prospective students overwhelmed the registration and security facilities of the university. As a result of the stampede, a mother who was accompanying her son to find a position at the university, was trampled on and subsequently died. The event prompted a national outcry demanding that more universities be built and the capacity of the existing ones be expanded in order to accommodate the high demand for tertiary education. No university has been built since the inception of the ANC-led democratic government. The Department of Basic Education and Training and the Department of Higher Education’s budgets collectively account for 75% of the South African National Budget.
2. Shocking and disheartening reports of HIV Positive people resorting to eating cow dung in order to be able to take their ARVs have highlighted the severity of food insecurity and therefore, the failure of King Moswati to govern the state and provide basic needs for its citizens. See: <http://www.irinnews.org/report>. “SWAZILAND: Desperate HIV-positive people eat cow dung to sustain treatment” by Humanitarian News and Analysis- a service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and <http://www.observer.org.sz/>, “AIDS PATIENTS LIVE ON COW DUNG” by Starsky Mkhonta.

3. See <http://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-1492-article-46+Arrested+for+plotting+Egypt+style+protest+in+Zimbabwe.html>, "46 Arrested for plotting Egypt style protest in Zimbabwe" by Byo24NEWS

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