



POWER TO THE PEOPLE: popular uprisings in North Africa

2011 is a year that will forever be synonymous with the Arab uprisings that have swept across the Maghreb and the Middle East. Economic stagnation, political oppression and dire poverty had undermined the integrity of citizens, culminating in these violent upheavals. The question remains: What will the implications of these uprisings be for the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty and political oppression are rife?

The recent uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa serve as a reminder that the analysis of geopolitics may reveal instances where a culmination of factors and events correlate to create unforeseen conditions, the consequences of which will have ramifications for decades to come. The North African uprisings began in Tunisia, when a young vegetable seller set himself on fire as a result of his dire living circumstances and the political oppression he had experienced (Ajami, 2011: 16). His suicide highlighted the harsh conditions under which Tunisian citizens lived, which soon led to the outbreak of protests and the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Ajami, 2011: 16; Arief, 2011: 1). These protests soon engulfed Egypt, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Yemen (Ajami, 2011: 16; The Economist(a), 2011).

Many factors played a decisive role in the culmination of these events in a region characterised by despotic leaders, patronage, weak economic policies, dire living conditions, lack of political reform, pervasive corruption and food insecurity (Haass, 2011; Ingham, 2011; Cole, 2011; The Economist(b), 2011; The Economist(c), 2011). These conditions had fed a sense of alienation and marginalisation within the general population, which intensified the desire for political reform (Haass, 2011). Demographic factors were also key in igniting rebellion across the region. Vast numbers of Arabs exist on less than \$2 a day, there is an overwhelmingly young population (the median age being 22), and unemployment is rife, creating circumstances that would ignite revolt once the match was lit (Ajami, 2011: 16). While the average living conditions of most citizens had severely declined, the relatives and political associates of political incumbents often enriched themselves at the expense of the general population (Cole, 2011). Growing inequity added insult to disaffection. Ironically, it was the pervasive poverty in the region that allowed the authoritarian regimes to persist as people attempted to maintain survival in their precarious environment (The Economist(b), 2011). The effort required by many to live day by day drained energy and resources, such as time for political assertion.

The riots highlighted the role of spontaneously formed, self-organizing groups in the dynamics of the uprisings. Students from the newly emerged middle classes and members of the labour movement were important in spearheading the insurrection, and the nature of the protests helped to highlight the increasing power of social media as a means of mass mobilisation and connectivity (Cole, 2011). Rather than being driven to action through membership in key organisations found in civil society, these groups were informal in nature, relying on social networks to organise their initiatives (Bremer, 2011).

Yet, despite the contagion, Libya shows that country specifics, such as tribal affinities, determine how regimes respond to mass insurrection. Richard Haass argues that the developments in Egypt will have inconsistent consequences for the Middle East and North Africa, with the impact depending upon the politico-economic context of each country. The monarchical regimes of Jordan and Morocco, for example, have adequate legitimacy amongst the people and will therefore be more stable, while countries with more authoritarian regimes will be adversely affected (Haass, 2011). This should signal caution when anticipating similar scenarios for Sub-Saharan Africa.

Could mass uprisings ignite the flame of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa?

The North African uprisings hold key questions with regards to the ability of civil society in the rest of Africa to stage similar protests to remove nepotistic rulers and improve living conditions.

"Instinctively, the popular uprisings in North Africa fill one with optimism for the whole continent," says Jacob Mati, an expert in the field and an ISTR Africa network member.

At first glance, there are many similarities between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, including high unemployment of the youth, poverty, political repression and

Differences may preclude the advance of democracy via this pathway in the countries of the Sub-Saharan. The society of North Africa and the Middle East is relatively homogenous and citizens share important cultural, religious as well as linguistic traits. In contrast, the societies of Sub-Saharan Africa tend to be more diverse and fragmented (Onyango-Obbo, 2011). Mati argues that these differences are important because cohesion and shared identity are critical for collective political action. In Sub-Saharan Africa, many leaders are effective in using religious and ethnic differences to divide and conquer (Onyango-Obbo, 2011).

in riots that have created both fissures and new configurations of power that will not permit a re-emergence of previous conditions of disempowerment.

According to Mati, "While the differences in Sub-Saharan African may decrease the likelihood that we will see uprisings manifesting in the same way, we hope that the events in North Africa may help to ignite imaginations and that this may spread the revolutionary spirit, as we witnessed following the fall of the Berlin Wall."

What do these events say about a comprehensive understanding of civil society as a dynamic phenomenon rather than its static organisational forms? What important lessons can actors from civil society learn from the recent uprisings in terms of their roots and roles as agents of socio-political change?

While the implications for African countries may not yet be clear, this appears to be a new day for civil society. Sanusha Naidu, a research director at Fahamu and an ISTR Africa member, says it is interesting that the North African uprisings have not been driven by traditional social movements. This is in stark contrast to the rebellions in the former Eastern European Communist Bloc in the late 1980s, where trade unions played a prominent role in social mobilisation. Naidu says, "Instead, in Egypt, Tunisia and now in Libya and Bahrain, the seeds of the protests are being sown by the grassroots mobilisation of the people themselves, who are displaying their frustrations and discontent. This highlights the changing nature of civic organisations by showing that it is no longer necessary for social movements to be the voice of the poor and the marginalised."

Naidu continues, "This may lead to far greater scope for ordinary citizens to take initiatives against incumbent leaders who are not fulfilling the wishes of the people."

Are similar developments possible in the ethnically diverse and tension-filled Sub-Saharan African countries, which are distinctively marked by divisive ethnic politics and a relatively small middle class that, more often than not, has a huge stake in the exploitative status quo?

the prominence of the military. In addition, recent food riots suggest that mass civil disobedience is likely to be ignited in Sub-Saharan Africa.

However, according to Mati, "We need to soberly reflect on the likelihood of the uprisings spreading to countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, toppling their many unjust regimes. The internal social dynamics of the Arab North African countries and the Sub-Saharan countries are clearly different.

"In North Africa, we have seen an educated middle-class utilising new media technology to organise and mobilise support for collective action without much external support. Are similar developments possible in the ethnically diverse and tension-filled Sub-Saharan African countries, which are distinctively marked by divisive ethnic politics and a relatively small middle class that, more often than not, has a huge stake in the exploitative status quo?" asks Mati.

Moreover, in Sub-Saharan Africa, supposedly functionally separate institutions such as government, market and civil society are in fact highly porous, to the extent that regime and civil society are often intricately connected. One consequence is that, while civil society has emerged in recent years to gain a more prominent position in the public forum, its status in the overall politico-economic trajectory remains fragile (Opoku-Mensah, 2009:15). This may undermine efforts by civil society to instigate protracted initiatives to reject despotic regimes. Affinities of family and internal divisions may impede attempts to force the installation of a fully democratic regime.

While there is no doubt that the politics of the Middle East will never be the same again, it may be too soon to tell whether conditions for regime change will emerge in Sub-Saharan Africa amidst deep social divides. In North Africa, decades of oppression and stagnation resulted

...could mass uprisings ignite the flame of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa?

References and further reading:

Ajami, F. 2011. "Demise of the Dictators." in *Newsweek*, February, 14: 14 – 21.

Arieff, A. 2011. "Congressional Research Service: Political Transition in Tunisia." 1 – 23.

Bremer, J. 2011. "Egypt: Civil Society Success or Spontaneous Combustion?"

Cole, J. 2011. "Labor movement drives Egypt, Tunisia protests." in the *Detroit News*, February, 10.

<http://detnews.com/article/20110210/OPINION01/102100341/Labor-movement-drives-Egypt--Tunisia-protests#ixzz1Elj1pTUh>

Haass, R. N. 2011. "Egypt's Uprising is only the first in many steps, the challenge ahead is to build a society on fair principles." in *Al Jazeera*, February 16.

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/02/20112141442299868.html>

Ingham, R. 2011. "Food, demography are invisible drivers in Egypt uprising." in *The Financial Express*, February 14.

http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=126081

Onynago-Obbo, C. 2011. "The Revolution in Black Africa Won't Be Played Out on the Streets."

<http://www.bookerrising.net/2011/02/will-north-african-protests-spread-to.html>

Opoku-Mensah, P. 2009. "Whither Africa's Civil Society." in *Development, Innovation and International Political Economy Research*: 1 – 21.

Shirky, C., 2008, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Penguin, New York.

The Economist(a), 2011. "Egypt after Mubarak: Where now for Egypt and the region?", February, 15

http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/02/egypt_after_mubarak

The Economist(b), 2011. "The upheaval in Egypt." February 3.

<http://www.economist.com/node/18063746>

The Economist(c), 2011. "Regional Reverberations." February 3.

<http://www.economist.com/node/18065663>

VOLUNTEERING re-examined

As the United Nations system celebrates the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteering (IYV+10), United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is working on a major and premier publication – State of the World Volunteering Report (SWVR) – to be launched on this year's World Volunteer Day, 5 December 2011.

The SWVR reflects on the relevance of volunteerism as a force for peace, development and networking, as well as helping to create the type of society that realizes the full potential of all its citizens. With the aim of challenging existing stereotyping and contributing to a better understanding of volunteerism, the SWVR challenges the dominant paradigm from the North that focuses on volunteerism in institutionalised settings and emphasises the absence of the same in poorer societies. Instead, the report uses a rich array of empirical data to argue that volunteerism is a universal human

behaviour in all societies, including the 'developing' or transitional societies of the South, in both formal and informal settings.

The report also examines the effects of various shocks (economic, social, cultural, political) on human societies, and studies ways in which volunteerism contributes to ameliorating the effects of these crises by contributing to livelihoods, social cohesion, inclusion, and governance. The SWVR notes that, while not a solution, volunteerism provides safety nets and social security for affected individuals.

The report further contributes to a paradigm shift in the thinking around development issues by showing that human beings are driven by deep impulses of solidarity to perform acts that aid community wellbeing. The SWVR is therefore important in giving global recognition to the contribution volunteerism makes to development. Be on the lookout for its launch!

EGYPT:

Civil society success or spontaneous combustion?

This winter's revolution in Arab societies has called into question much that has been said or written about the public space in the Arab world over the past several decades.

Gone is the image of the Egyptian or Tunisian (or Libyan or Bahraini) public as too passive and cowed to act.

Gone is the concept that change in the region is impossible or, at best, can progress only in timid baby steps. Gone is the assumption that a sustained and credible attack on the old order can be mounted only by the Islamists, though they remain the only really organized opposition group, or that any popular uprising would soon fall under Islamist control.

Gone, too, is the idea that building

civil society would be a necessary precondition to reform.

Instead, it has turned out that all it took to spark a revolution, given massive popular anger, was a handful of skilful professional organizers linked by technology and dedication.

Over the past several months, the rise in temperature has been palpable. It was evident that the previous mood of resignation and despair was heating up toward fury. Whereas young taxi drivers used to just shrug their shoulders when asked what would happen if Mubarak died (my standard interrogatory), now they might just as likely launch into a diatribe on the need for Mubarak to die, for someone to just kill him. "Egypt is

Gone, too, is the idea that building civil society would be a necessary precondition to reform.

boiling," said one truck driver.

Many of the drivers looked to the army to save them when the time came, trusting them to bring some order and reform. They have gotten their wish; let us hope they are right.

Despite millions of donor dollars directed to boosting the non-Islamist elements of civil society, what we got

oppressive tactics, necessitating a new approach.

The revolution was not led by any of the civil society groups supported by the donors, but by an informal group of highly committed young activists. Some, but by no means all, of the main organizers are affiliated with the April 6th Youth Movement, a band of

of Tahrir is not the formal dialogue but the new-found spirit of activism epitomized by the dozens of citizen-watch groups that sprang up spontaneously to guard homes and families when the police melted away (seemingly under orders). The teams of young volunteers who came together to clean Tahrir Square carried out a truly revolutionary act in the context of Egypt, asserting the public's ownership of public space. More prosaically, we are also seeing a burgeoning of long-suppressed independent unions and new civil society groupings of all kinds.

Now that the revolution has been launched and Mubarak is safely in his beach villa, civil society is coming out of its shell. Existing groups, such as the Egyptian Association for the Support of Democracy and the Ibn Khaldun Center, as well as newly formed groupings of youth and professionals, are turning to the question of how to organize the next critical phase of the transformation.

Together, these developments provide early but convincing signs that, though Egypt's revolution was sparked by spontaneous combustion not civil society, CSOs will have a huge role to play in keeping the revolutionary fires burning.

The teams of young volunteers who came together to clean Tahrir Square carried out a truly revolutionary act in the context of Egypt, asserting the public's ownership of public space.

was not CS, but SC – spontaneous combustion.

All it took was for the government, quite arrogantly, to light the match. Last year, the resurgent security forces apparently decided to redress the holiday score between the military (five holidays) and the police (none) by creating Police Day. The new holiday was intended to commemorate a heroic, if unsuccessful, stand against the British by Suez police at the start of the previous revolution in 1952, an event that only the great-grandparents of today's youth would personally recall.

It was only a fortunate coincidence that this new holiday (soon to be renamed, presumably), fell a scant few days after Ben Ali's flight from Tunis.

Depending on your point of view, the way that the Tahrir Revolution played out can be seen either as a victory for a new form of civil society or proof that CS had been largely sidelined by the Mubarak regime's

young radicals formed to organize a day of protests on 6 April 2008, mostly around labour issues. The movement has little official organizational presence beyond its Facebook page. April 6th formed, in part, to pick up the banner seemingly dropped by Kefaya ("Enough"), the latter having failed to live up to the promise of its early protests once Mubarak's thugs and bureaucrats implemented their well-practised pincer movement.

Others in the core Tahrir organizing group, epitomized by Google executive Wael Ghonim and surgeon Shady El-Ghazaly Harb, were even less formally organized. This apparently nameless bunch of 30-something professionals came together with April 6th and other groups to organize the Police Day protest, meeting and planning in secret and employing such time-honoured revolutionary techniques as independent cells to avoid detection by the security forces.

The most promising development for civil society in Egypt to come out

Jennifer Bremer is a member of the ISTR Africa network. She is an associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Policy and Administration, American University in Cairo.



Jacob Mati elected to ISTR board

We are pleased to announce that Jacob Mati has been elected to the ISTR Board. Also a member of the Africa ISTR organising committee, Mati is an independent civil society expert who has consulted for several international organisations, including the United Nations and CIVICUS.

Astonishing growth for the network

Since its relaunch at the ISTR conference in Turkey in July last 2010, the African Civil Society Research Network has grown from 25 to 80 members. It now has representation from most countries on the continent. In addition to the conference in August this year, we hope to launch a virtual library and offer research grants.

PROFILING CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCH ON THE CONTINENT:

Centre for Civil Society at University of KwaZulu-Natal

The Centre for Civil Society (CCS) is committed to advancing socio-economic and environmental justice by developing critical knowledge about, for and in dialogue with, civil society through teaching, research and publishing.

CCS teaching and outreach includes formal instruction within the School of Development Studies Masters programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal, in the form of

Civil society organisations linked with the CCS are also given the opportunity to participate in evolving formulations of theories on civil society.

two modules: Political Economy of the Welfare State and Civil Society and Development; the coordination of courses centred on African Political Economy and Civil Society for various overseas universities, namely, the University of Ottawa, Long Island University and St Catherine's College; and the CCS Community Scholarship programme. This ensures that theoretical understandings of the concept 'civil society' are underpinned by practical experiences. Civil society organisations linked with the CCS are also given the opportunity to participate in evolving formulations of theories on civil society, as well as the capacity to utilise these theories in their own particular environments.

CCS Community Scholars include leaders of Durban-based civil society organisations the Westcliff Flats Residents Association and the Didiyela Women's Group, who have been at the forefront of advocating for basic water, sanitation and electricity services in Chatsworth and Inanda. The CCS also has a monthly public lecture series, as well as a weekly seminar series. The Wolpe public lecture series for early 2011 will include a focus on the environment, reflections on the

ANC under President Zuma and debates around the 2011 local government elections. The Seminar Series began 2011 with sessions on global justice, the history of civil society and reflections from CCS staff who attended the 2011 World Social Forum.

CCS research and publishing is structured within four categories: Political Economy, Political Ecology, Culture and Social Movement Studies. Following research carried

out for the publication "Zuma's Own Goal", 2010, Maharaj B. Desai, A. Bond, P. (eds), which examined neoliberalism, the dual economy debate, class apartheid, poverty research, the feminisation of poverty, wage labour, rural survival and township protest, critiques of South Africa's political economy will continue into 2011. This year will also see the continuation of the CCS Environmental Justice Project ahead of the November Climate Summit.

CCS cultural activities for 2011 will continue with the Durban Sings Audio Project, which trained some 50 young people from 12 community organisations in Durban in 2010, as well as the Durban Community Video Project, which produced 15 community-made documentaries last year. The CCS Social Movement Studies research will, in 2011, focus on social protest and implications for social change utilising the CCS Social Protest Observatory.



THINKING ABOUT CIVIL SPACES

African civil society network conference in August 2011

There is great excitement among members in anticipation of the African Civil Society Conference from 23 to 27 August this year. The theme is "Civil Spaces in Africa: Current, Present and Past." Our aim is to deepen scholarly understanding of African civil spaces in their cultural, social, demographic, economic and political pluralities and particularities. Original, conceptual or empirically grounded contributions are welcome from a variety of social-oriented discipline, including, but not limited to: history, sociology, economics, demography, geography, cultural studies, literature, and political science.

As the venue, we have chosen the prestigious Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS). This is a fitting location as it has been modelled as an African version of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and recently hosted Nobel Prize winners Sydney Brenner and Gerard't Hooft. Renowned for its excellent food and hospitality, STIAS is located on the scenic Mostertsdrift farm in the heart of Stellenbosch, within walking distance of the university and the town's historic centre. Additionally, Stellenbosch is just 30 minutes by car from Cape Town International Airport and less than an hour's travel away from Cape Town.

Alan Fowler, Adam Habib and Mark Sidel will speak at plenary sessions. Furthermore, we have invited a prominent African academic to be our keynote speaker and hope to confirm participation within the next few weeks.

In addition, we have secured funding for travel grants and hope to release more information about this soon. A two-day training workshop is also scheduled.

Please note that, in response to requests from members, the deadline for submitting abstracts has been postponed to 29 April.