

62. Africa's uprisings: no end in sight

Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly

Tunis, Cairo, Khartoum, Dakar, Ouagadougou, Lagos, Kinshasa, Kampala, Lilongwe, Cape Town – these are only a few of the African cities that have been convulsed by major urban uprisings over the past five years. Today's wave of popular protests is erupting in response to the rapidly rising inequality experienced by Africa's urban poor under the current neoliberal dispensation, occurring even as many countries register positive GDP growth. For these swelling, largely young urban populations, electoral democracy – which arrived in much of Africa simultaneously with structural adjustment – appears to offer no answers to their predicament. And so the young and other urban dwellers take to the streets in large numbers, often with little formal organization or leadership, but motivated by powerful slogans: *Y'en a marre! Ash-sha'b yurid isqāt. an-nizām* – the people want to bring down the regime! #FeesMustFall!

As we argue in our recent book, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*, this current protest wave is not the first Africa has seen. Precariousness, staggering inequality and a lack of political voice have characterized the daily lives of Africa's urban poor since the colonial period. These continuities in Africa's urban economic and political conditions have given rise to previous protest waves: first in the late colonial period, when popular protests were channelled into nationalist movements throughout the continent; and then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when protests against the austerity imposed by international financial institutions, and against years of authoritarian rule, forced the inception of multiparty democracy in dozens of African states. As that order enters into crisis today, proposed solutions to inequality that ignore the often radical demands coming from young, urban Africans will be insufficient. Politicians and policy-makers must take seriously the voices of protesters in the streets who are asserting their own understanding of economic inequality and putting their own solutions into practice.

Bibliography

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