

Five Reasons There Will Be No African Spring

Written by Ioannis Mantzikos

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IOANNIS MANTZIKOS, AUG 23 2012

While the attention of Arab and Western media was largely focused on the historic victory of the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate in Egypt, street protests of a scale not witnessed for two decades have erupted in Khartoum and other major Sudanese cities. There are also protests in Gabon and Togo, while the upcoming elections in Kenya are anticipated with anxiety. Previously, Iran's 2009 Green Revolution flopped and the flower revolutions in Eastern Europe have wilted.

After the Arab Spring, is Africa next? There is little reason to expect, or hope, that African societies will mobilize to overthrow their corrupt governments anytime soon. The first African Awakening occurred in the 1990s. But another wave of revolutions is unlikely.

At least five reasons conspire against any popular African revolutions.

To begin with, Africa experienced an unprecedented and fast-moving series of democratic transitions in 1990–1994. Although a few transitions happened earlier, some durable and some short-lived, they represented little more than exceptions on a continent where the typical regime was authoritarian, relied on single-party rule, and kept civil liberties under tight control.

Second, Kenya and Zimbabwe are the most recent examples plagued by electoral violence, for which Ted Gurr argues that “the process of transition creates threatening uncertainties for some groups and opens up a range of transitory political opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs.” However, it will possibly take years for North African countries to reach the level of Kenya and Zimbabwe-style power sharing agreements, which showed an effort and a commitment to establish a democratic platform between warring factions.

Third, what George Ayittey called Africa's ‘Hippo Generation’ of corrupt leaders and bureaucrats are still in power south of the Sahara. Unlike North Africa and the Arab World, this was the rule rather the exception until recently. In Senegal, President Wade has only superficial similarities with some of the dictators of the Arab world who have been toppled in the past year, such as a partiality for garish monuments, the apparent grooming of a son as a successor, and his constitutional meddling. Wade is not a vicious dictator. Senegal has a more open tradition of parliamentary democracy than Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

Fourth, the protesters in North Africa benefited from the element of surprise. In contrast, the Sub-Saharan governments which have prepared to meet large-scale protests were not caught flat-footed, unlike their North African counterparts. In fact, governments in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced similar kinds of protests in recent history, the cases of Benin in 1990, Nigeria in 1993 and Kenya in 1992 being primary examples.

Fifth, sub-Saharan Africa has a smaller urban, literate middle class than most of the countries of the Arab Spring, with only limited access to technology. This vastly diminished the potential of mass mobilization to turn protest into revolution and regime change. Moreover, Nairobi officials estimate that close to 70 percent of the urban labor force is employed in the informal sector. Petty commerce and street vending predominate. Such employment, which barely meets subsistence needs for many in it, is confined to a world of violence and impunity, not just because of the sheer illegality of the goods, which include contraband drugs and guns. The involved organizations often act as miniature

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states by monopolizing the means of violence and providing protection in exchange for loyalty and territorial dominion. So there are no mass uprisings in Kenya. The dispirited and unemployed youth find shelter in the perceived political society of criminal organizations, like Mungiki, which act as employer, protector and social worker.

Rising up against governments makes less sense for most Africans than protesting through informal politics and their own perceived political societies. In Sudan, this poses little threat to the regime. The military and security establishment is loyal to the central government, while the opposition and civil society are weak and divided. Kenya is a different story. Rapid urbanization since the 1990s has brought with it a huge set of problems, from fuel and housing scarcities to unemployment which, if unresolved, will destroy the old bonds of community that exist among Kenyans.

To summarize, Clive Gabay put it far better than anyone:

“African elites are not uniquely corrupt, nor do they exist in a vacuum of African corruption, but neither is Africa a pure victim of contemporary economic imperialism. African elites are as complicit in processes of resource and profit extraction as the multinational corporations such as Shell Oil who so often come in for the vitriol of social justice and anti-corporate activists. It is not enough for international donors to call for ‘free and fair’ elections, only for them to enforce, by dint of the implicit threat of aid withdrawal, complicity amongst all the candidates with neoliberal economic worth”.

Although signs of an early African Awakening occurred in the 1990s, these green shoots have not yet grown. Popular pressure, and its ability to be concentrated and mobilized against corrupt state power, has not yet reached boiling point in Africa. It may yet happen. In hindsight, we can rationally explain the Arab Spring as inevitable, even if no one saw it coming. If and when popular revolt comes, let us hope it can achieve transition peacefully, not through the barrel of a gun. Violent revolutions would risk repeating African history.

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Ioannis Mantzikos is a PhD Candidate at the King's College in London and an Assistant to Adama Gaye at the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford University.