

Excluded youth are becoming angrier

Huge student demonstrations in South Africa in October 2015 were officially about university tuition fees, but were actually about the failure of post-apartheid South Africa to create jobs, writes Alcinda Honwana. This is part of growing youth unrest across Africa, ranging from demonstrations last month in the Republic of Congo to support for Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram.

South African student protesters stressed the failure of the post-apartheid regime to address the inequities of the past and create jobs. This was underlined by **xenophobia riots** earlier in the year when the poorest South Africans claimed foreigners were taking the few jobs available. Further attacks on immigrants were reported last month in the South African city of Grahamstown.

Young Congolese last month braved teargas and rubber bullets to denounce the referendum to allow the 71 year-old President Denis Sassou Nguesso to stand for another term after 31 years in power. There have been similar demonstrations in **Senegal and Burkina Faso**.



Students march in a #FeesMustFall demonstration in Pretoria Credit: Paul Saad via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/1PAjeWV>) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Young people aged between 15 and 25 **are 60 per cent of Africa's** total population, **which means it has the youngest population in the world**. Soaring youth unemployment rates and lack of sustainable livelihoods mean the young are unable to earn a living. Not just in their 20s, but also into their 30s, they cannot become fully independent and establish their own families and thus achieve culturally recognized adulthood. Across Africa, the majority of the young people today are caught in **what I call "waithood"** – no longer children but waiting for adulthood. **My own interviews** with young people show them trapped in this in-between stage and becoming frustrated.

Some survive in the informal economy. Others migrate in search of better opportunities abroad. But an increasing response to the pressures of waithood has been the move to join violent extremist groups, which provide them with an adult-like status through purpose, responsibility and financial compensation.

In Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, Al-Qaeda, ISIL and Salafist groups have been recruiting young people following their disillusionment with the Arab Spring revolutions. And in West Africa, young people in Nigeria, northern Cameroon and Niger, who lack access to school and employment, are

increasingly fighting alongside Boko Haram. **In a recent paper**, LSE Professor Kate Meagher pointed to the way that the shrinking of the formal economy in northern Nigeria is pushing more educated people into the informal economy, which in turn is pushing out the less educated, some of whom are recruited by Boko Haram.

In East Africa, Al-Shabaab has been attracting young Muslims, especially newly converted Muslims, by providing them with financial incentives and a strong sense of identity, purpose, and community. Elgiva Oliacha, a 28-year-old Kenyan, also known as Mohammed Seif, was jailed for life in 2011 after confessing to **carrying out two grenade attacks** in Nairobi. Oliacha grew up as Catholic in Western Kenya and converted to Islam a few months before joining Al-Shabaab.

The West has not been immune to the penetration of these radical organisations that attract citizens of immigrant descent struggling with “waithood” and a sense of belonging. Growing up as the “other”, especially when combined with discrimination and joblessness, can push young Europeans of foreign descent to seek a home where they belong, and feel respected and valued. Certainly, these radical groups have been able to attract disaffected youth from all over the world by offering a coherent message that neatly packages young people’s frustrations with political exclusion, financial hardship and the struggles of Muslims across the globe.

A confidential **UN Security Council report** estimated that 15,000 foreign fighters have gone to Syria to join ISIL. The **European Union estimates** that at least 6000 are from EU countries. Three British schoolgirls, Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana, and Amira Abase, all top students from East London, shocked the country when they fled to Syria in search of a new life with Islamic State.

“Waithood” involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and financial independence; it represents the contradictions of modernity, in which young people’s expectations are simultaneously raised by new information and communication technologies that connect them to global cultures, and yet constrained by the limited prospects and ever fewer opportunities in their daily lives.

A marginalised but technologically sophisticated African youth is becoming angrier. South Africa’s student demonstrations have been organised around a Twitter hashtag #FeesMustFall,. Congolese protesters organised around the much texted slogan “Sassouffit!” (a hybrid of *Sassou*, the president’s name, and the French expression “*ça suffit*”, which means “Enough!”).

And militant organisations are maintaining twenty-four hour online operations, with their effectiveness extended by large numbers of sympathetic volunteers who pass on the messages.

I will give a LSE Africa Talks public lecture on Wednesday 18 November 2015 at 6.30 pm and I have used the Congolese slogan as part of my title: **“Enough!” – Will Youth Protests Drive Political Change in Africa?”**

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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