

Africa's Youth are Saying Enough but Will it Lead to Political Change?

After attending a recent lecture by Professor Alcinda Honwana, LSE alumnus Aurelien Leblay examines possible reasons behind the rise of youth protests on the African continent.

Youth-led protests are becoming a regular feature across the African continent. In places like Senegal, Burkina Faso, Egypt and Tunisia, these movements have succeeded in setting a new political agenda. Similar protests also occurred in Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa. To Professor Alcinda Honwana of the Open University, these protests are the result of what she calls “waithood”, that is, the fact that young people are forever waiting to be financially independent. In most cases this time never comes and the majority of young people are stuck into a cycle of humiliating survival. Many are forced to extreme consequences such as life-threatening migration or male and female prostitution. This latter phenomenon, known as “sugar daddies” or “sugar mamas” is a bitter illustration of what deprived youth is forced to endure. This degradation and powerlessness is perhaps at the core of young people reactions, including the most radical ones.



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

In a recent LSE public lecture entitled **Enough! Will Youth Protests Drive Political Change in Africa**, Professor Honwana pointed out that some young people had even joined violent radical groups such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, ISIS or Al-Qaida, which were built on the ashes of the disillusionment of the Arab Spring. She revealed that Tunisia is the country with the largest number of its citizens involved with ISIS. For example, hip-hop star and activist Emino, a figure of the peaceful “Jasmine Revolution” has now joined ISIS. For young people forever waiting for income and parenthood, violent groups allow them to “fight well, make money and find yourself a girl”, as an interviewee of Honwana said.

It is absolutely vital for Europeans to face this truth: the size of recruitment pools is more dependent on economic factors rather than ideology. **Anneli Botha's research** – cited by Honwana, shows that “economics and deprivation are as important, if not more so, than religious factors in explaining al-Shabaab recruitments in Somalia”. **Other studies have reached similar conclusions, including industrialised countries.** In fact, even the West is being affected by this phenomenon, with radical violence also attracting its own citizens “struggling with waithood and the sense of

belonging”. As Honwana points out, violent fanatic groups attract “vulnerable disaffected youth from all over the world by offering a message that responds to young peoples’ frustration with unemployment, financial hardship, social marginalisation and political exclusion”. In other words, when even the slightest hope is not allowed anymore, extreme pathways are considered a lot more by young people. The most fragile are among the first to get trapped by deadly ideologies.

Professor Honwana mentioned migration as another consequence African youth hopelessness. “More than 100,000 African cross the [Mediterranean] sea each year”. She noted that Europe recognises unemployment as the main cause of migration, but still sets up repressive responses to it. In that respect, we would urge any citizen and policy-maker to fully embrace the reality of youth in “waithood”, and complement their understanding by real stories. For instance the brilliant documentary “Barcelona Or Die” by Idrissa Guiro is a very acute look on why young people make risky choices. In this subject like in others, the smartest and optimal responses are often overlooked because of misconceptions or ignorance of reality.

The third and most promising prospect is organised protest, which has proven short-term achievements but failed to foster durable change. Alcinda Honwana stressed the role of the neoliberal paradigm in weakening states’ capacity, and the fact that young people are also facing international capitalism beyond domestic issues. Can capitalism work for the benefit of all and serve inequalities reduction? The “embedded liberalism” that prevailed in the Bretton Wood period (1944 – 1971) advocates for it, in spite of mixed results for Africa.

What reasons are there for hope? Honwana mentioned new political waves in the West, a rejuvenated Pan-Africanism or the raising awareness of youth power even though it might not bring about change immediately. In a bittersweet conclusion she quoted an activist from Senegal: “Perhaps my situation won’t change much, but we believe in ourselves and we will fight for our children”. Let us offer another optimistic scenario: Africa can embrace the green growth revolution and **be at the cutting edge of zero-carbon energy**. Meanwhile, Europe can understand the benefit of having Africa as its main economic partner and start fostering a robust, balanced and highly cooperative relationship. This bears an intrinsic paradox: it is very idealistic and very attainable at the same time.

Listen to the audio of this event or read the full lecture.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author 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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