



Impact of the North African Revolutions on Sub-Saharan Africa

by Lydie Boka¹

Introduction

Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have shown to the world and Africa that authoritarian regimes are definitely gone. Things will never be the same again. A taboo has been broken. The image of the “Father of the Nation” is shattered. In the next few years, if not months, Africa should see fewer leaders wielding too much power, building a system of patronage and a culture of corruption while failing to address problems facing ordinary people. Also gone are the days of so-called model economies and showcases of the west such as Tunisia. There is no more showcase. Africa demands more accountability, and donors are busy revising their models.

The North African spring has without any doubt influenced politics in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Since the beginning of 2011, bemused Africans have seen “permanent” dictators such Ben Ali or Mubarak fall. Africans are watching closely what is happening in Libya and begin to think that maybe they too can change things in their own countries. Gadhafi used to be, if not an admired figure, at least a feared leader not only in his country, but also in SSA where he financed a number of investments (as well as coups and revolutions). Gadhafi's fall may weaken some dictators who benefited from his financial and military support. Opposition movements and pressure groups in SSA have immediately seen the opportunity arising from all these changes and are trying to organize people, with some success in some countries.

Is the North African model usable in SSA? Are activists and politicians referring to the Arab Spring?

The influence of youth organizations and rappers on SSA organizations cannot be denied, as evidenced by the *Y'en a marre* (“We're fed up”) movement in Senegal, modelled after Egypt's *Kefaya* (“Enough!”) and other movements such as *April 6*, initially a Facebook group in support of a strike that took place in 2008. Mid-February 2011, *Dakaronline* published an article titled “the demise of Mubarak puts an end to Wade's dynastic ambitions”.² From then on, the Senegalese press enthusiastically followed Mubarak's fall, drawing a parallel between Gamal Mubarak and Karim Wade, the alleged successor of his father, President Abdoulaye Wade.³ Opposition leader Niassé wished “the same for Senegal”.⁴

In Uganda, during the February elections, SMS and other messages including the words “Mubarak”, “bullet”, “Tunisia”, “people power”, “dictator”, “teargas”, “army”, “police”,

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² Christophe Boisbouvier, RFI, “La fin de Moubarak met fin à l'agenda dynastique au Sénégal”, (interview with Cheikh Tidiane Gadio), reproduced by *Dakar Online*, 14 February 2011 http://www.dakaronline.net/La-fin-de-Moubarak-met-fin-a-l-agenda-dynastique-au-Senegal_a9866.html

³ Barka Ba, “Karim Wade et Gamal Moubarak – Hosni soit qui mal y pense!” 2 February 2011, *Leral.net*, http://www.leral.net/Barka-Ba-Karim-Moubarak-et-Gamal-Wade-Hosni-soit-qui-mal-y-pense-_a13720.html

⁴ “Les journaux dissèquent la chute de Moubarak”, Agence de Presse Sénégalaise, 12 February 2011

“gun”, “Ben Ali” and “UPDF” were prohibited.⁵ UPDF is the acronym for the Ugandan military that has supported President Yoweri Museveni, in power for the past quarter century, and could violently put down any public protest.

In Angola, an anonymous group in March via the Internet called for a protest against President Eduardo dos Santos, but the attempt was nipped in the bud. Rapper Brigadeiro was arrested.⁶ In Zimbabwe, students were arrested for watching an Al Jazeera and BBC video showing the “uprisings that brought down autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt”.⁷ The *Zimbabwe Independent* also drew a parallel between Robert Mugabe and Hosni Mubarak: “Following the ouster of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, many Zimbabweans are of the view that the ejected head of state and his Zimbabwean counterpart, president Robert Mugabe, are mirror images of each other”, adding that there are “uncanny similarities between the two in terms of their policies, time in office and relations with Western countries”.⁸

In Burkina Faso, references to the Arab spring were not so obvious during the March/April protests by students and the civil society. Although international media tried to draw a parallel between the unrest and the Arab spring, it seemed that the protests did not draw directly on inspiration from further north. Burkina is a country where seemingly very polite and patient people suddenly rise up and get rid of their leaders when confidence is gone; and they have done so at least three times since 1966. Maybe it was bolder this time. The army tried to join the April and May protests and will probably try again until President Blaise Compaoré, in power since 1987, is ousted from power, especially since he fired over 500 soldiers in July (without daring to touch officers though).⁹ Compaoré has allowed luxury housing projects to flourish in Ouagadougou, such as “Ouaga 2000”, where water sprinklers hiss over grass and flower beds in a poor and dry, Sahelian country; and his inner circle is perceived as corrupt. The conditions are ripe for an “Arab” revolution, especially since his role in a number of West African conflicts is increasingly being revealed for example in Côte d'Ivoire, where rebels were able to organize themselves and plan their 19 September 2002 attack from Burkina's territory. For Liberia and Sierra Leone, Compaoré introduced Charles Taylor to Gadhafi and financed rebellions in West Africa.¹⁰ But things are not that simple.

The army is usually well treated in Africa and not only in dictatorships. It successfully quashes any revolt that threatens the regime. It is usually well represented in governments.

⁵ Elias Biryaberema, “Uganda bans SMS texting of key words during poll”, Reuters , 17 February 2011 <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJ0E71G0M520110217>

⁶ Yves Marcel Youant “Angola – Une manifestation contre le pouvoir de Dos Santos reportée suite à des arrestations » Afreelection, 7 March 2011. <http://www.afreelection.com/crise/item/3865-article5847.html>

⁷ Cecilia W. Dugger , “Arrests in Zimbabwe for Seeing Videos”, *New York Times*, 21 February 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/22/world/africa/22zimbabwe.html>

⁸ Leonard Makombe . “Mubarak, Mugabe Regimes - So Many Parallels to Draw”, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 25 February 2011 <http://allafrica.com/stories/201102250810.html>.

⁹ RFI 14 July 2011, in AllAfrica.com <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201107141154.html> « 566 militaires radiés et pas de nouveau mandat à priori pour Compaoré »

¹⁰ Richard Banegas and René Otayek, in *Politique Africaine* (Editions Karthala, Paris) No. 89 of March 2003, page 79 mention big cargoes and members of Compaoré's presidential guard. This is also quoted here http://www.hei.ulaval.ca/fileadmin/hei/documents/documents/Section_Publications/Securite_mondiale/Securite_Mondiale07.pdf and confirmed in StrategiCo.'s research on Burkina, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire 2005-2011 (Country reports).

When does it decide to join a protest? In Tunisia and Egypt this year, it is only when armed forces backed the people that the dictators left. In Côte d'Ivoire, in 2000 the army disobeyed its leader and stopped shooting, reversing the balance of power. There is a critical point when the army feels that things have done too far: the rioters are too many and repressing them would result in a bloodbath, and/or the revolution is irreversible; or the army is in danger itself, especially if some of its forces have joined the rioters. This was the case in Madagascar in 2009 or in Côte d'Ivoire after the controversial October 2000 elections.¹¹

In Tunisia, on 12 January, General Rachid Ammar stepped down rather than shooting rioters, unlike the police that continued to support Ben Ali,¹² and became a hero. He told Ben Ali: “the army does not shoot the people”.¹³ In Egypt, after 17 days of expanding unrest, the army – which has been holding power since the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 – also felt that the time had come for Mubarak to go and told him so¹⁴ probably because they were afraid of going down with Mubarak. There are other cases where the army decides to right wrongs: In Niger, when Tandja in 2009 changed the constitution to extend his stay in power, it is the army that ousted him in 2010 and returned the country to a civilian rule. In Guinea, when erratic military ruler Dadis Camara became a danger, it is another officer who took over and handed over power to civilians in 2010, although the army is still powerful today. Decades earlier, Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings changed the face of Ghana, and in 1991, Amadou Toumani Touré brought democracy in Mali after President Moussa Traoré's forces shot at students with real bullets. In Zimbabwe, the army lives in its glorious past from the liberation war and the top brass has vowed never to salute any leader who did not fight the war against the whites. It is backed by paramilitary forces with vested interests including the “War Veterans” who ensure the system goes on. In Uganda, the army is dominated by south-westerners (just like the president) and in 2010, Museveni was careful enough to promote his son Lt. Col. Muzoohi, already head of a special unit, to be head of the presidential guard. Museveni's brother Caleb Akandwahano is senior defence adviser.

To what extent do the conditions that brought about the North African revolutions exist in sub-Saharan African countries?

Dictatorial regimes in place for 20 or so more years, such as those of Presidents Museveni (26 years in power), dos Santos (32 years), Biya (28 years in Cameroon), Compaoré (24 years in Burkina), Obiang (32 years in Equatorial Guinea), are revolution- and conflict-prone. They look very much like the pre-revolution eras in north Africa, with the muzzling of the press – as in Ben Ali's Tunisia, or any number of SSA countries. Countries where the army is at the president's feet are also candidates for a change (in Togo, where the Kabyé, a tribe from the north, dominates the army); a ruling family entrenched (Gabon or Togo – and

¹¹ Situation institutionnelle de la Côte d'Ivoire, Sciences Po, Bordeaux (no date), <http://www.etat.sciencespobordeaux.fr/institutionnel/cotivoir.html>.

¹² “Tunisie : L'armée a lâché Ben Ali”, *Le Monde*, 16 January 2011 http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/16/tunisie-l-armee-a-lachee-ben-ali_1466290_3212.html

¹³ Isabelle Lassere “Rachid Ammar, le Centurion du Peuple” *Le Figaro*, 22 January 2011 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2011/01/22/01003-20110122ARTFIG00005-rachid-ammam-le-centurion-du-peuple.php>

¹⁴ Michel Martinez, “In Egypt the army makes its move, inches Mubarak towards door”, CNN, 10 February 2011. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-10/world/egypt.protest.military_1_egyptian-people-president-hosni-mubarak-egyptian-israeli?_s=PM:WORLD



suspicious that the same is intended in Senegal); or the regime is totally controlled by a clan, precluding de facto any candidature by the opposition (Egypt or Equatorial Guinea), and/or with resources embezzled on a grand scale (widespread, but Gabon and Equatorial Guinea stand out). However, things are different in SSA. Population and money play a significant role.

Although conditions in Gabon or Equatorial Guinea may call for an uprising, the population may not be ready. The same holds even for Libya. Indeed, small, relatively pampered and/or well-controlled populations seldom rise up spontaneously. Libyans were relatively wealthy (per capita income of \$11,000 in 2010, IMF) relative to the rest of Africa and until recently did not exactly display a “revolutionary spirit”, probably partly because of the brutal repression by Gadhafi (who himself came to power by a coup). Did they also suffer from the “Gulf state syndrome” whereby there is money (mainly from oil) but few exciting projects as the entire economy is based on oil, migrants do the work and bored youth drives fast cars in the desert to kill time, enjoying drifting, a free style sport? It seems to have been a “favoured diversion in sleepy Benghazi, a city with lots of cars and young men. Before the February uprising, young men gathered in Kish Plaza (Benghazi) on Thursday nights to watch drivers punish their rides with high-speed drifts and doughnuts, until the police would stop the show.”¹⁵ Until recently, Libyans were seen as a people thinking more about spending on luxury goods or nice holidays in Tunisia, where they are nicknamed “green locusts” (for the wads of U.S. dollars they carry). The ragtag rebel army is a mix of Islamists and ex-members of the regime with very few people defending a credible cause apart from getting rid of Gadhafi, which in itself is a fully understandable goal. Gaddafi himself, who rebelled against a weak and corrupt monarchy, to some extent redistributed oil wealth after he achieved a higher oil price in the 1970s, until he drifted himself.

Small Gabon, with its 1.6 million people, and a per capita income of \$4,200 (2009), is a typical example of a SSA country where money weakens political determination. Gabonese are used to comfort (that could pass for luxury elsewhere in Africa), with the minimum wage set at CFA 150,000 (about \$300). The opposition, more or less linked to the regime and its goodies, lacks credibility. The main opponent, Mba Obame, from the powerful Fang tribe which stretches from Equatorial Guinea to Cameroon, is an ex-minister and friend of the president. His attempts to set up a parallel government earlier this year have been met with indifference if not amusement. What would make young Gabonese take to the streets is blatant injustice, ethnic issues, and rising unemployment. The authorities make sure things never fester beyond control, keeping an eye on powerful trade unions; especially since in August 2011, 13 of them started a movement called *ça suffit comme ça* (“That’s enough now”) who have been able to mobilize workers more than the opposition has been able to organize Gabonese around a cause. Resentment against the French, who have become unpopular for supporting the Bongo regime for 40 or so years (including the succession from Bongo *père* to *filis* in 2009), and keep a military base there in addition to exploiting oil, could however be the trigger. But again, do young Gabonese want a radical change? Gabonese felt angry right after the 2009 elections that brought Ali Bongo to power¹⁶, and although the

¹⁵ Kareem Fahim, “Young and Bored, Behind the Wheel”, *New York Times*, 29 May 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/30/world/africa/30benghazi.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁶ “Un sentiment de révolte anime les Gabonais” *Le Monde*, 4 September 2009



youth accounts for 60 percent of the unemployed¹⁷, they are not hungry and may feel that maybe things are not too bad after all, looking at their neighbours. Indeed, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index, Gabon moved from 103rd in 2007 to 93rd in 2010, ranking fifth in Africa after Libya, Mauritius, Tunisia and Algeria¹⁸, and first in SSA. At the same time, Congo Republic was 126th; Cameroon, the top economy of CEMAC, the French-speaking economic zone of Central Africa, ranked only 131st; and Congo DRC miserably trailed at bottom, ranking 168th out of 169. In Equatorial Guinea, the small (about 600,000) and literate (87 percent) population is totally controlled by the Obiang clan. Power is incestuous (with several members of the president's immediate family in the government), the opposition is weak and operates from outside the country. Geography would make an Arab spring even more difficult as the country is an island with part of its territory on the mainland, neighbouring Gabon.

The main differences stem from the fact that socio-economic conditions are not there: Tunisia's 74 percent literacy rate, or Egypt's 71 percent, barely compares with Burkina's 22 percent. In a changing world, literacy is important to understand new concepts, own them and apply them at home, otherwise one faces the risk of taking shortcuts and applying ill-digested concepts at home. A Facebook revolution requires a minimum literacy rate for activists to be able to exchange views via the Internet, read messages, express themselves and agree on a strategy, largely in writing. Nonetheless, other technologies are available and in the past, when literacy rates were even lower, SSA people managed to kick out unpopular leaders.

Although Zimbabwe's literacy rate is 90 percent¹⁹, income per capita was \$176 in 2008 in that country. One would first need to feed oneself and then think about "higher" things such as political freedom, especially via Facebook. In 2008, during the post-electoral crisis, some observers wondered why Zimbabweans seemed unable to get rid of Mugabe.²⁰ Zimbabweans rebelled against the ZANU-PF regime, but their efforts were blunted if not thwarted by huge challenges on a daily basis: power outages, poor communications and fuel shortages, scarce food in some areas and high unemployment (80 percent of the population). Elsewhere, lower unemployment rates would have set the country on fire, but how does one call for a rally if the phone is not working? How does one stage a protest at the other end of town without transportation, and with an empty stomach? Not even mentioning the well-functioning Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), the semi-official War Veterans and other paramilitary forces. Also, some argue that Zimbabwe's "Egypt moment" in Zimbabwe occurred in the late 1990s when a strong alliance of trade unions and civic forces confronted the Mugabe regime in a series of strikes, stay-aways, demonstrations, the creation of a vibrant constitutional movement and the formation of a strong, national and multi-class opposition party, which effectively challenged the ruling party at the polls throughout the 2000s and in

http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/09/04/un-sentiment-de-revolte-anime-les-gabonais_1236121_3212.html.

¹⁷ Infogabon, 26 May 2011, <http://infogabon.com/?p=9606>.

¹⁸ UNDP, *Human Development Index*, 2010.

¹⁹ CIA *The World Factbook*, 2010

²⁰ "Zimbabwe : adieu Mugabe ?" interview of the writer with French TV *France 24*, 31 March 2008 <http://www.france24.com/fr/20080331-debat-zimbabwe-adieu-mugabe-elections-mdc-harare&navi=DEBATS>



2008”.²¹ We think that the Egypt moment is yet to come, when the entire regime, not just Mugabe, disappears, and that access to information will make it possible. Meanwhile, for the Zimbabwean press, “the systems [Libya and Zimbabwe] thrived on repression and the use of security apparatus [...]. In most cases the police is used and at times the military when it is necessary to do so especially during elections.”²² In Uganda and Zimbabwe, as in Tunisia, the army is loyal and probably not republican enough to distance itself from the regime — but the North African wind is blowing and change is coming.

Technology : mobile phones as the “Facebook” of SSA?

Modern technology penetration is deeper in North Africa than in SSA. Average Internet penetration is 11.5 percent²³, with a high 30 percent in Nigeria, West Africa's economic powerhouse to a low 3.7 percent in Cameroon. Who owns a computer in SSA? Educated people from the small African middle class, either with the ruling party or in the opposition can afford a computer. Young people, who account for about 40 percent of the population in SSA go to Internet cafes rather than surfing from home, making it more difficult for them to organize around a cause.

Could mobile phones be the “Facebook” of SSA? According to a recent study published in Moroccan paper *Assabah*, Egypt is the number one Arab country in terms of Facebook users (quantitative), but Tunisia (with 20 percent of the population using Facebook) is the Arab country “that has made the best use of the social network to spark the revolution.”²⁴ It also notes that countries that are still struggling to topple their leaders are those where the use of information technologies is under 5 percent (Libya, Yemen, and Syria), while Egypt and Tunisia are the top users in the Arab world. Tunisia also has a 90 percent mobile penetration rate, while Egypt's is 72 percent.²⁵

Mobile phone penetration in Africa is growing at the fastest rate in the world, jumping from 54 million in 2003 to 350 million users in 2008. Today, one African out of two has a mobile and, between 2002 and 2007, subscriptions have grown by 49 percent per year against 17 percent in Europe. This a great opportunity for democracy. As seen during the September 2010 food riots in Mozambique, mobile phones can be powerful tools. The government quickly realized it and moved to suspend communications to quell the revolt. Mozambique has a low 2.6 percent Internet penetration rate (CIA, 2009) but a reasonably high 25 percent mobile phone penetration rate. Taking mobiles as the equivalent of Facebook in SSA, one could imagine the impact in repressive countries with even higher mobile penetration rates. Togo, with a low Internet penetration rate of 5.26 percent, has a 32 percent mobile penetration rate, while Zimbabwe, with 11 percent Internet use, has 24.8 percent mobile use. The impact in Angola, where freedom of expression is even more limited, would be even more dramatic, with 60 percent using mobiles while Internet use is at only 4.5 percent.²⁶

²¹ Brian Raftopoulos, Effects of North Africa on Zimbabwe Politics, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 18 August 2011 <http://www.theindependent.co.zw/opinion/32082-effects-of-north-africa-events-on-zim-politics.html>

²² Makumbe, *Zimbabwe Independent*, op cit.

²³ RFI 17 August 2011.

²⁴ AFP 19 August 2011.

²⁵ CIA *World Factbook*, on Tunisia and Egypt.

²⁶ Statistics taken from Joan Tilouine “La Révolution mobile sur le continent”, RFI 17 August 2011,



Arab revolutions have also made activists in SSA aware of the power of instant image transmission. During Côte d'Ivoire's post-electoral crisis, some protesters used their mobiles to film brutal armed forces cracking down on them and immediately beamed images to the world, putting pressure on the Gbagbo administration.²⁷ In Togo, the opposition also routinely uses camera-equipped mobiles during protests, and as a result, armed forces may have become slightly less violent, knowing that Western countries could slap sanctions on them. That is, of course, if the repressive regime has not cut all instant transmission. But even so, the mere thought that a few images may be sneaked out of the country acts as a deterrent and repressive regimes would probably become more careful. Activists feel stronger and have become bolder thanks to their new tool, that plays the crucial role of keeping them alive in dictatorships. Removing fear is key and changes things in Africa. As simple as it sounds, by connecting SSA to the world, mobile technology reminds dictators that they cannot continue to kill opponents quietly in a dark corner.

Technology is not a cure-all though and the role of mobile phones in SSA may seem more logistical than strategic. While Facebook allowed activists in north Africa to exchange views for months, the mobile phone in SSA, serves more to agree on a place and date for the rally. Its role is more “immediate”. People in SSA first need to organize around a common cause. This enables them to rise up “spontaneously” at the merest incident. Only homogeneous groups such as students, unions or corporations can get organized and discuss issues without being spotted too early by the regime. When the army joins in, the revolution is a success. Technology removes fear and changes Africa.

Conclusion

African revolutions face technological problems, linked to lack of financial means. Because Internet is not as developed in SSA, a “Facebook” mobilization led by educated, unemployed youth such as in Egypt or Tunisia is unlikely. Mobiles may help people to mobilize, but it means they would have first managed to discuss the issues and exchange views, the way long chats on the Internet allow. Image transmission has, nevertheless, become the new weapon against repressive regimes, provided one could afford to buy a camera-equipped mobile phone. Technology plays here a crucial role as it removes fear among activists and is changing things in Africa. Finally, the movements were led by youth movements, not opposition parties, who jumped in, rather than led the revolutions. Can groups in SSA mobilize without political parties? Can groups get organized without being spotted by dictatorial regimes in countries with huge logistical challenges? For an Arab spring to happen in SSA, people will need to rise up spontaneously, rather than spending long hours on the net, beyond their means anyway. And a popular uprising is impossible without the backing of the army.

<http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201108161001.html>

²⁷ StrategiCo.'s January, February and March 2011 reports on Côte d'Ivoire <http://www.strategico.fr>