



The Political Changes in North Africa and the Middle East and the Implications for Sub-Saharan Africa¹

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In the immediate days of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) numerous questions were asked about whether Tunisia and Egypt's popular uprisings could be replicated in Sub-Saharan Africa. A number of countries (e.g. Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Cameroon) were singled out as ripe for similar uprisings. A full understanding of what is taking place in the MENA area and what the future might hold for the region and the extent of its impact on the rest of Africa will require time. There have, however, been spates of protests around the continent that are reportedly inspired by the Arab uprisings and which have generated some heavy-handed response from Africa's leadership. These merit some initial discussions about what the MENA uprisings signify for Africa; for the African Union and continental diplomacy, and for many African states' stability. This paper reflects on and draws out some lessons emerging from the uprisings for the African continent, in particular focusing on two aspects: the resonance of popular uprisings in sub-Saharan Africa, and the implications of the Libya conflict.²

I. Arab-style uprisings in Africa?

The question of whether the Arab uprisings could happen on the rest of the continent seems at first sight a curious one for it suggests little knowledge of sub-Saharan Africa's post-colonial history of struggle for transition, freedom, liberty, political participation and more broadly, an open society. With the end of the Cold War 1989, the continent witnessed a decade of upheaval and conflict, an end to one party rule in several countries and the birth of multiparty politics (e.g. Mali, Benin, Kenya, Malawi and Ghana); the death of apartheid, and the rise of what former South Africa president Thabo Mbeki described as an "African renaissance".³ But achieving the core elements of such a renaissance (i.e. social cohesion, democracy, economic reform and growth) proved difficult or short-lived in many countries. Some new democracies and more stable societies have emerged, but political pluralism, economic liberalisation, political participation and freedom of expression remain distant dreams for Africa's weaker, fragile or failing states. The state in Africa continued to control the production and distribution of national resources; it was an instrument of accumulation and patronage that was exploited by the political (and often military) elites and external investors and resulted not in development and growth, but glaring socio-economic disparities and poverty. The conditions to facilitate development – democratisation, participation, and a vibrant civil society (including trade unions) – were stifled. Maybe the focus of discussions should be on whether there are lessons for the MENA countries to learn from Africa's unfinished renaissance and the realities of trying to establish open societies.⁴

Perhaps what is striking about the Arab uprisings and which the rest of Africa has not witnessed with the same intensity, is the convergence of various forces coming together to form a mass resistance. The uprisings are essentially a pan-Arab cross-border youth rebellion that includes working class and trade union elements with shared grievances over economic, social, civil and political disparities in

¹ This paper is based on an opening dinner speech given at the Africa Coordinating Group Bi-annual meeting, OSI Africa Regional Office, Dakar, 18 May 2011. I would like to thank my colleagues at International Crisis Group for their comments; the views in this paper are, however, mine.

² This paper was written before the rebel advance to Tripoli and demise of the Qaddafi regime in the latter half of August 2011.

³ The African Renaissance Statement of Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, 13 August 1998, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0813.htm>

⁴ See also Michael Marc, "Egypt: Democracy without development?", <http://www.royalafricansociety.org/component/content/article/851.html>



their countries. Unusually, they built alliance with the middle and upper classes, human rights groups and other formally registered civil society organisations, as well as internet-savvy diaspora who, in the Tunisian case, were key in the end to driving the protest all the way to the presidential palace and to leaving the leader, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, with no “elite” options.⁵

In the past, there have probably been only two comparable “uprisings” in sub-Saharan Africa that drew the support of a large cross-section of society: in Sudan, the 1985 ousting of President Jaafar Nimeiry⁶ and, as Mahmood Mamdani recalls, the development of two significant events in South Africa – the formation of independent trade union in Durban in 1973 and the Soweto uprising in 1976 which laid the foundations for “a new era in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa”. Soweto introduced a youthful, popular and alternative form of struggle distinct from the armed struggle; it cut through several boundaries – race, the political elite and tribal – that eventually led to apartheid’s death.⁷

Nonetheless, as greater knowledge of what the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia set in motion gains greater traction across the continent, their political impact will reverberate. Many of the undercurrents and triggers – longevity of political leaders, lack of political reforms and failed economic liberalisation, sharp increases in prices of food and fuel – are equally true in Africa. Though we cannot suggest that every protest action we see across the continent is now as a result of the MENA uprisings – protest has a long history in Africa too -- it is hardly surprising that street protesters on the continent have tried to link their grievances to current events taking place in the Arab world.

The response of Africa’s leaders, meanwhile, has been to use repressive tactics to maintain a grip on power – so far more successfully than Presidents Ben Ali or Mubarak.

In Uganda, the ‘Walk to Work’ demonstrations following the February 2011 elections were to an extent inspired by Tunisia’s ‘jasmine revolution’ and the revolt in Egypt. However, the project to reform Ugandan politics may take much longer than many hope, in part because President Yoweri Museveni appears quite willing to use force, while the protest’s most visible leaders are old and somewhat discredited opposition leaders. Although Kizza Besigye became the international face of the ‘Walk to Work’ protests, he was certainly not the organiser or the main force behind the campaign. Support for him galvanised around his rough treatment by Ugandan security services. Unlike in Egypt, there is no Muslim Brotherhood to provide an organised national backbone to resist the security crackdown, and it is unlikely that any single group can emerge to take that role.

Zimbabwe has seen its own protests and riots for over a decade now, and seems stuck in a permanent transitional phase. The security forces took no chances at an Arab spring-inspired renewal of pro-

⁵ ‘Popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia’s Way’, *Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report*, N° 106, 28 April 2011, pp. 3-9.

⁶ In March 1985, a few days after Nimeiry had doubled the prices of bread, petrol and public transport, public protests began in Sudan. Daily protests continued and were soon to be joined by university students, union activists and tens of thousands of others. Many were arrested and a state of emergency was declared. As in Tunisia, the military at first watched impartially; but eventually sided with the popular uprising. On 5 April 1985, the Sudanese armed forces supported the people’s demands for the ouster of Nimeiry and seized power in Sudan, while Nimeiry was out of the country; they suspended the constitution, sacked Nimeiry’s top officials and dissolved the People’s Assembly. Led by General Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab, they formed a transitional government and organised democratic elections. A year after seizing power, the military relinquished power to a democratically elected government only for that government to be ousted on the 30 June 1989 by the National Islamic Front and its successor, the National Congress Party under President Omar al-Bashir. See *Divisions in Sudan’s Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country’s Future Stability*, *Crisis Group Africa Report*, N°174, 4 May 2011, pp. 5-6.

⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, “‘Walk to work’ and lessons of Soweto and Tahrir Square”, *Pambazuka News*, May 2011, Issue 527, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/72940>.



democracy activism, and arrested and tortured social activists, including Munyaradzi Gwisai, a former opposition member of parliament, for organising a meeting to discuss and watch DVDs of the demonstrations in the MENA region. They initially faced charges of treason that carry the death penalty.⁸ Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Services provided no coverage of what was happening in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

In Angola, President José Eduardo dos Santos reacted swiftly to efforts by what internet-based organisers called "the Angolan People's Revolution" aimed at ending his 32-year rule.⁹ Seventeen protesters were arrested on 7 March and government responded by holding its own counter-rallies.¹⁰ In the small kingdom of Swaziland, public discontent has been mounting against the absolute rule of King Mswati. A Facebook campaign commenced in March 2011 based on the same tactics employed in Tunisia and Egypt. The internet campaign led to demonstrations against a proposed public sector salary freeze. A pro-democracy rally, organised on 12 April and purportedly intended to emulate events in the MENA region, was successfully snuffed out by the government. Pre-emptive arrests of trade union and student leaders, as well as journalists, were followed by police using tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to disperse the peaceful crowds made up mostly of students and teachers. Another planned protest to mark the 38th anniversary of the ban on political parties resulted in crackdown as government security forces arrested and detained activists.¹¹

On the 20 and 21 July, thousands took to the streets of the Malawian capital, Lilongwe, to protest against corruption, economic mismanagement and soaring fuel and commodity costs. The police resorted to using teargas and live ammunition to contain the crowds. At least 200 were arrested in the capital with a further 45 arrested in Zomba and 30 more in Blantyre. Those arrested included civil society activists and journalists. Demonstration organisers had threatened to return to the streets on 17 August if economic and social reform demands were not met. This prompted a series of harsh reactions from President Bingu wa Mutharika, who claimed the protestors were being "led by Satan".¹² Under intense pressure, Mutharika began to pursue a carrot and stick approach, on the one hand threatening tough action against demonstrators, yet also and in response to stinging international criticism, seeking some level of rapprochement. In mid-August he was able to announce that protest organisers had agreed to enter into a dialogue with government under the auspices of the United Nation. In an effort to consolidate his position, Mutharika reshuffled the leadership of the Malawi Defence Forces and is reportedly planning a major cabinet reshuffle. Analysts believe Mutharika has been badly damaged politically and will be unable to ensure that his plans for his brother, Peter, to succeed him are realised.¹³

Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré faced significant street protests when students protested the death of a young man in police custody in February 2011. After 24 years in power, Compaoré seems unable to address the economic and social problems of the Burkinabè society. He has no answer to give to the claims of the young generation and has lost his grip on the army. On 14 April, his presidential guard ran riot in the capital Ouagadougou, demanding their March pay and housing and food allowances, which the authorities began to pay out on the day after. In an effort to defuse

⁸ See "Zim charges 46 with treason", ZimOnline, 24 February 2011 and "46 Accused of Treason in Zimbabwe to Stay in Jail", Associated Press, 23 February 2011.

⁹ Louise Redvers, "Mass protests fail but Angolan activists remain defiant", www.ips.org, 10 March 2011.

¹⁰ ["Angola: Intimidation Campaign to Stop Protest"](#), Human Rights Watch, 9 March 2011.

¹¹ **Alan Whiteside and Jacquie Hadingham**, "Swaziland in Crisis", <http://africanarguments.org/2011/07/25/swaziland-in-crisis/>, 25 July 2011.

¹² "Malawi protesters 'being led by Satan', says Mutharika", Mail and Guardian, 23 July 2011.

¹³ "Malawi: Mutharika circles his wagon", *Southern African Report*, Vol. 24, No. 21, 18 August 2011, pp. 2-3.



tensions, on 18 April, Compaoré dissolved his government and appointed a new Prime Minister. He has however used force to hit back at protestors and shows no willingness to step down from power.¹⁴

The impact of the uprisings has been felt significantly in Arabic-speaking African countries, including, Sudan, Djibouti, and Mauritania. Sudanese President Bashir gave public support to the Transitional National Council (TNC) fighting against Qaddafi, but this has not lessened the numerous protests against him from student activists and opposition forces.¹⁵ The start of the year witnessed an increase in suppression of civil and political freedoms in response to calls within the opposition to topple the government. Anti-government protests inspired by the Egyptian demonstrations erupted in Khartoum on 30 January, led by youth and students of Khartoum University. Some 16,000 joined anti-government groups on social-networking sites, but unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the trade unions who had spearheaded previous public revolts in Sudan (two since independence: October 1964 and April 1985) were totally absent due to the imposition of total state control of the unions following the ousting of Nimeiry in 1985.¹⁶

In the lead up to elections in April 2011, Djibouti witnessed a series of protests in the capital, led by a coalition of opposition groups calling for the removal of President Ismail Omar Guelleh, in power since 1999.¹⁷ The immediate trigger was the simmering frustration felt by opposition towards what they regarded as Guelleh's manipulation of the National Assembly to urge it to amend the constitution in 2010 to allow him the right to run for a third term.¹⁸ Opposition and other dissident groups were emboldened by the MENA uprisings to demonstrate, but government's reaction was swift and significantly undermined any further momentum to protest.

In Mauritania, President Ould Abdel Aziz, who had traditionally kept close relations with Libya's Colonel Qaddafi, faced upheaval at the start of the year. An attempted imitation of 21-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation (which sparked Tunisia's uprising) by 43 year old Yacoub Ould Dahoud against the government, provoked protest in the capital, Nouakchott. Demonstrations initiated via Facebook spread to other major cities in Mauritania and continued for several months as citizens demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Moulay Ould Mohamed Laghdaf, despite minor economic concessions offered by his government.¹⁹

Some African leaders have confidently ruled out the possibility of MENA-style uprisings in their countries. South Africa's president Jacob Zuma chimed that the country's constitutional democracy means that such uprisings were not possible, even though there have been widespread protests against service delivery failures.²⁰ President Rupiah Banda of Zambia took a 'democratic' perspective extolling the importance of responding to population needs and cautioned his regional counterparts to refrain from suppressing their people if the uprisings witnessed in North Africa were to be avoided in Southern Africa.²¹

¹⁴ Geoffrey York, "African strongmen crush attempts to emulate pro-democracy uprisings", *Globe and Mail*, 6 May 2011.

¹⁵ President Bashir may have publicly supported the TNC for numerous reasons including seeking to undermine Colonel Qaddafi Libya's because of his financial and military support to rebel groups in Darfur and because of Qaddafi's historical antipathy to Islamic movements, including Bashir's National Congress Party.

¹⁶ Interview with Sudan expert, Nairobi, 31 July 2011.

¹⁷ Although he personally came to power in 1999, the current government has been in power for 34 years.

¹⁸ Interview with Djibouti expert, Nairobi, 24 March 2011.

¹⁹ Seyid Ould Seyid, "Mauritania police crush protest - doctors announce strike", Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 9 March 2011 and Sara Ghasemilee, "Protests stun Mauritania", *Al Arabiya*, 25 April 2011.

²⁰ "SA will not have uprisings – Zuma", www.polity.org.za, 16 March 2011.

²¹ "Banda warns SADC region after North Africa uprisings", www.sabcnews.com, 31 March 2011. Banda made this statement in the context of sending a sharp rebuke to political leadership in Zimbabwe (and to a lesser extent in Madagascar).



Where protests have taken place, they have not been successful in toppling any government so far. Among the reasons are, perhaps, that there seems to be very limited knowledge of the detail of what has been happening in the MENA region. This could partly be explained by the fact that the Arab spring “speaks Arabic” and uses Arab political cultural vernaculars (Arab slogans, rap songs, poems), while “globalized” Arab youths have propagated it through the now famous Facebook-Twitter-YouTube nexus, fed by reporting from the Doha Arabic speaking Al Jazeera network.²²

There have of course been some interest from political activists, but responses have been extremely limited and have not involved serious organising and mobilising. In some instances, such as Angola’s internet-based organisation created to protest against President Dos Santos, there was rather a sad expectation that social messaging alone could generate protest.²³

Moreover, where citizens do not have a political direction or champions to lead and engage them, the potential for widespread protest is limited. Opposition parties are fragmented, while trade unions have been in decline (although this may not necessarily be true in South Africa where the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) still wields significant power). Media coverage from domestic news agencies has been limited and for many access to print media is a luxury item, while in some countries censorship has deliberately tried to restrict knowledge of the events in North Africa, and while access to international and satellite channels is very limited.²⁴

II. Libya’s impact

Of the three largest uprisings in North Africa, it is the protracted, continuing military conflict in Libya that has had the most important immediate impact on the rest of the continent in terms of security and diplomacy.²⁵

a. Sahelian Africa

The conflict in Libya immediately presents threats to the stability of Sahelian countries (especially Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad)²⁶ that have traditionally been in Tripoli’s orbit. Key concerns include large-scale refugee crises; the proliferation of arms and the movement or recruitment of fighters; and the risk of infiltration by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which already has networks in Algeria and Niger.²⁷

The spreading of Libya’s massive arms stockpile in the region, especially small arms and portable anti-aircraft missiles, remains a major threat. In addition, the prospect of recruitment of fighters or the return of fighters who have previously fought in Qaddafi’s army poses a real danger to the Sahel region and other West African states. Years of building good relations with Touareg communities in neighbouring Mali and Niger enabled Qaddafi to rely on this group at the start of fighting in Libya,

²² Interview with North Africa expert, 31 July 2011.

²³ Interview with Southern Africa expert, 17 May 2011.

²⁴ To a certain extent, these conditions were also true in Tunisia and Egypt and further research needs to be undertaken to understand how various groupings were able to overcome these restrictions, as well as a comparative analysis to enable us to empirically examine what factors were present in these countries to allow for a successful revolt. [A combination of factors enabled these revolts including political leadership and the nature and dynamism of civil society was a critical determinant, more advanced social media options, extensive cell phone networks, greater smart phone penetration, and much better internet access \(it is about one percent in Zimbabwe\)](#)

²⁵ There were uprisings in Morocco and Algeria as well, but they were not as large as Tunisia, Egypt or Libya.

²⁶ Other states that often constitute the Sahel are Senegal, Burkina Faso and Sudan.

²⁷ See also “Libya: Achieving a Ceasefire, Moving toward Legitimate Government”, Crisis Group media release, www.crisisgroup.org, 13 May 2011.



especially veteran Touareg rebel fighters from rebellions in their countries.²⁸ The prolonged military campaign and instability also present the risk of infiltration by AQIM, whose networks of activists can be found in Algeria, Chad, and Niger, countries sharing borders with Libya, as well as Mali.²⁹

One consequence of the involvement of non-Libyan fighters in the Libyan civil war has been to revive xenophobic and racist reaction against all those “black Africans”, who have travelled to Libya in large numbers since the 1970s to make money from the country’s vast oil fields.³⁰ A pressing concern is how the countries to which they have been forced to return will cope with the influx and with the sudden end of remittances, an important cash injection. In May, Niger appealed for international assistance to cope with an estimated 93,000 migrants returning to the country.³¹ A severe crisis is looming in Chad, where, by the end of June, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimated that 43,000 migrant workers had returned.³² The large influx of returnees has forced Chadian authorities to establish national committees to cope with the swell in numbers of migrants. Transit camps have been set up in the northern town of Faya Largeau.³³

b. Implications for Chad

More than any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa, Chad is watching closely the ongoing events in Libya. The fate of President Idriss Déby’s government may be closely linked to Qaddafi’s Libya. As an ally of Qaddafi, President Idriss Déby is in an awkward position for three reasons. First, Chad has been at the centre of Qaddafi’s Africa policy, a mix of vague impulses to win support, but also manipulate particularly vulnerable and weak states in an attempt to exert power. Second, for two decades, Chadian foreign and security policy has been solely based on the Tripoli-Paris axis, conceived as a cornerstone of the government’s external system of support. Qaddafi has played a vital role, both public and private, in brokering several inter-Chadian peace talks between the Chadian government and rebels, including the armed Toubou group operating in the northwestern Tibesti region bordering Libya. Qaddafi played an important role in ensuring that the Toubou ethnic groups in Libya, Chad and Niger did not unite into a potent rebellion. With instability in Libya, these groups could take the opportunity to revive their rebellion. Further instability could erupt in Niger and Chad, whose Toubou groups have strong connections with Libyan Toubou.³⁴ Déby has raised real fear that AQIM forces are operating with insurgent groups in the Benghazi, Libya, and rebel groups in the Tibesti region may also be reinforced by the possible instability in Libya. But this suggestion may be a likely attempt by Déby to deflect criticism away from those critical of his closeness to Qaddafi.³⁵ Third, Libyan investments in Chad have traditionally played an important part of President Déby’s economic calculations. It is for these reasons that Déby initially expressed (at least) political support to Qaddafi, including military support. This position changed when it became politically dangerous given his government’s close ties with France and the latter’s role in the NATO intervention.³⁶ US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared following a meeting in June with the

²⁸ See “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya”, *Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°107*, 6 June 2011, p. 23. The Tuareg have fought over many years with their governments in their countries. Qaddafi has played various roles in their rebellion, including supporting their fight and brokering peace deals.

²⁹ See also David Lewis “Analysis: Stray Libyan small arms may threaten region”, Reuters, 11 May 2011.

³⁰ African migrants targeted in Libya, Al Jazeera, 28 February 2011.

³¹ “Niger seeks aid as 93,000 return from Libya”, AFP, 13 May 2011.

³² “Chad: The Libya fallout”, Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 29 June 2011.

³³ Thierry Vircoulon and Saad Adoum, “The Libyan crisis as seen from N’Djamena”, *On the African Peacebuilding Agenda*, www.crisisgroup.org, 8 June 2011.

³⁴ Interview with Chadian expert, Nairobi, 9 March 2011.

³⁵ Thierry Vircoulon and Saad Adoum, “The Libyan crisis as seen from N’Djamena”, op.cit.

³⁶ Interview with Chadian expert, Nairobi, 2 August 2011.



country's foreign minister that "the Chadian government does not support Qaddafi."³⁷ A period of uncertainty looms in the Chadian capital N'Djamena while the political class awaits the outcome of the Libyan crisis.

c. The Libyan conflict's impact on Africa's diplomacy

Libya's armed struggle has significantly impacted continental diplomacy, in particular relations between the African Union and the United Nations and Africa and Western powers. Qaddafi's dual role as benefactor and meddler in African affairs posed a real dilemma for the AU and its members. Further, his prominent role, along with other African leaders, in transforming the Organisation of African Union into the AU meant that it would have to tread carefully in taking a decision on Libya. Libya has been one of the five largest contributors to the AU coffers (along with Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria and South Africa), and the Libyan crisis brought the Arab uprisings closer to the continental body, which had remained cagey in responding to revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. Some of Africa's large states, such as South Africa (particularly under former president Thabo Mbeki) and Nigeria, had grown wary of Qaddafi's ambitions since he began his campaign in 1999 for a continental government (i.e. a United States of Africa), with a unified army and monetary system.³⁸ They have nonetheless benefited from Libyan investments in their national economies. Other weak or small states, especially those with membership in the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CENSAD), established in 1998 and largely funded by Libya, have benefitted greatly from Qaddafi's "humanitarian" gestures over many years and remained loyal to him. One wondered therefore if there would be a huge divide in how to handle the Libyan crisis. The AU was conspicuously silent when Qaddafi began attacking demonstrators in early February 2011; later that month it issued a surprisingly robust statement condemning the "indiscriminate and excessive use of force" and recognised "the aspirations of the people of Libya for democracy, political reform, justice and socio-economic development are legitimate".³⁹ In a landmark decision, on 25 March 2011, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, in relation to an application from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights of 3 March alleging serious and massive violations of human rights in Libya, called on the government to "immediately refrain from any action that would result in loss of life or violation of physical integrity of persons."⁴⁰

Three AU member states who served as non-permanent members of the UN Security Council – Gabon, Nigeria and South Africa – voted in favour of Resolution 1973 on 17 March which called for a no-fly zone over Libya. But as NATO bombs fell on the Libyan capital, Tripoli, Africa states that originally supported Resolution 1973 developed serious reservations as they worried that it was now setting a new precedent of regime change.⁴¹ In the face of criticism from the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), South Africa's President Jacob Zuma stated that the no-fly zone should be restricted to civilian protection and not regime change.⁴² In a long essay detailing Qaddafi's "mistakes" and "positive points" on the continent, President Museveni criticised the UNSC for

³⁷ Alex Thurston, "Sahelian Leaders Look to a Post-Qadhafi Libya," <http://sahelblog.wordpress.com>, 13 June 2011. The two met on the sidelines of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) forum in Zambia.

³⁸ In March 2011, Nigeria recalled its ambassador to Tripoli following Qaddafi's call for Nigeria to split into two states one Christian, one Muslim in the wake of massacres in the northern Nigerian city of Jos in the same month. See Chinyere Amala, "Nigeria: FG Lambasts Ghaddafi, Recalls Ambassador", *Vanguard* (Nigeria), 18 March 2011. See also Adekeye Adebajo, "Africa grows suspicious of Gaddafi's bizarre ambitions", *Business Day* (South Africa), 1 April 2010.

³⁹ Communiqué of the 261st meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council, 23 February 2011.

⁴⁰ "In the Matter of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Application No. 004/2011, Order for Provisional Measures, para 25 (1).

⁴¹ Charles Onyango-Obbo, "Why Gaddafi's war is giving Uganda, Nigeria nightmares", *Africa Review*, 27 March 2011.

⁴² Sam Mkoeli and Hopewell Radebe, "Zuma rejects Libya regime change objective, but defends SA vote in support of UN resolution to protect civilians", *Business Day*, 22 March 2011.



rushing the voting on Resolution 1973 and condemned the NATO bombing as Western double standards, claiming the intervention was being motivated by oil.⁴³ South Africa and Uganda are members of the AU Ad-hoc High-Level Committee on Libya established by the AU on 10 March to mediate the Libyan conflict, which also includes two Sahelian states, Mauritania and Mali.⁴⁴ The AU, typically opposed to interference, especially military, in the affairs of another state, despite the changes introduced in the AU Constitutive Act (2000) which give member states the right to intervene to protect citizens against genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity⁴⁵, rejected the NATO bombings and immediately used its ad-hoc panel to lead a counter-initiative calling for a ceasefire and political dialogue in place of military action.

Inevitably the AU and the US and EU would clash over competing approaches to securing Qaddafi's exit. Relations were already fraught between the AU and the UNSC over African concerns that the Council had repeatedly ignored an AU request since 2009 for the Council to use its Article 16 powers of the ICC Rome Statute to defer the arrest warrant for Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir. Thabo Mbeki, who had launched several attacks over the UN's role in Côte d'Ivoire's post-election crisis from December 2010 to April 2011, condemned the UNSC for ignoring the AU in Libya, although he also reserved some criticism for the organisation he helped to establish when he stated that Africa was "unable to quickly decide how we should respond" and that "we instinctively resolved that we had no choice but to stand back and wait".⁴⁶ Mauritania's Foreign Minister Hamady Ould Hamady, speaking on 15 June at a meeting between the UNSC and the AU Ad-hoc High-Level Committee on Libya in his capacity as spokesperson for the committee, expressed the AU's surprise and disappointment "at attempts to marginalise Africa from the management of the conflict". On compliance with Resolution 1973, he stated that "it's a dangerous precedent created by having a one-sided interpretation of (the resolution) and the consequences that could result for international legality."⁴⁷ The harshest criticism however came from Uganda's permanent representative to the UN, Ruhakana Rugunda, who charged that "an attack on Libya or any other member of the African Union without express agreement by the AU is a dangerous provocation.... Ignoring the AU for 3 months and going on with the bombings...has been high-handed, arrogant and provocative. This is something that should not be sustained or repeated".⁴⁸ The Ugandan statement signified the level of animosity by the AU towards the UN over its marginalisation and the NATO bombings.

At the core of AU criticism of the UN-mandated intervention was an assessment that the bombings in Tripoli had exceeded the mandate of Resolution 1973, but also a deep sense that its call for a political solution had being ignored, further demonstrating to the AU that the resolution was principally about regime change and that African views were simply irrelevant to the US, UK and France, leading the NATO bombing. Political dialogue and the process of achieving it has been a source of divide between the AU and Western powers. Both sides agreed that Qaddafi had to step down, the question was how. For the AU, a ceasefire and open talks with the Tripoli government, including Qaddafi is the essential step to ending the armed struggle; demanding his removal ahead of such talks, the preferred option of some Western powers, as well as the rebel TNC forces, makes Qaddafi an increasingly entrenched leader.

⁴³Yoweri Museveni, "The Qaddafi I know: The Libyan leader was no saint. But the West was wrong to intervene in African affairs", *Foreign Policy*, 24 March 2011.

⁴⁴The other country making up the 5-member ad-hoc committee of Heads of States is the Republic of Congo. See also Alex Thurston, "Sahelian Leaders Look to a Post-Qadhafi Libya", <http://sahelblog.wordpress.com>, 13 June 2011.

⁴⁵ Article 4 (h).

⁴⁶Thabo Mbeki, "The UN Security Council made absolutely sure that it ignored the continent's views on what had to be done to help Libya", *The Star*, 5 April 2011.

⁴⁷Speaking at the meeting between the UNSC and the AU Ad-hoc High-Level Committee on Libya, 15 June 2011.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

But even the AU option of negotiations with Qaddafi might have dissipated given his adamant decision to stay and fight until the end. Moreover, there appears to be a shift in thinking by some African states, particularly from those Sahelian countries threatened by the fallout of continued fighting in Libya. Senegal's President Wade established relations with the Libyan TNC in May when he visited them at their base in Benghazi and called for Qaddafi's departure.⁴⁹ He was not the first to recognise the rebels; Gambia had already taken the lead. President Déby's government, as mentioned above, changed tactic given the international context. In an about turn, Mauritania's president, who serves as chair of the AU's ad hoc committee, announced that Qaddafi's departure "had become necessary", a sign that even the AU had become exasperated the Libyan crisis.⁵⁰ His views were not consistent with the AU's public posture, but provide indication that even for Africa's continental body, finding an "African solution" has been made more difficult by Qaddafi's hardened position.

III. Conclusion

Many of the undercurrents that fuelled the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings throw a spotlight on an old but significant trend on the continent: protests related to social, economic and political domestic issues. These are likely to continue growing in Sub-Saharan Africa with or without the inspiration of the North Africans: the political and socio-economic realities that drove public outrage in Tunisia and Egypt are real across the continent.

An important lesson that African citizens should take from events in the north is that formal opposition parties were not fundamental to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The frustrations and grievances of ordinary people coalesced into a significant coming together of people power to step in where formal opposition was unable to lead an effective campaign for genuine change. The vanguard, as is often the case, was not party leader; rather the protests took the form of mass-based protest. The lessons on the potential for 'people power', while it may appear a distant dream for now, should be studied with great care.

Tied to this, African citizens must avoid the simple assumption that events in the MENA areas are simply spontaneous and that there was no planning. This overlooks a fundamental lack of understanding of the preparations that were involved or the strategies and tactics employed. Despite the technology advances, many on the continent remain insulated from understanding what has transpired and the need to control the discourse on change and resistance; there needs to be further discussion and lessons on the strategy around alliance building, the development of organisational skills, the investment in mobilisation and communications, and the utilisation of available space (albeit in difficult circumstances).

Tensions between the West and UN versus the AU over the handling of Libya once again drew attention to the need to develop a better formula for cooperation with regional organisations. A few months after the start of the NATO bombings, considerable efforts have been taken to work more closely with the AU over Libya, but the crisis has left a bitter taste in the mouths of AU officials.⁵¹ Resolving these tensions may take some time, but better engagement is needed to mend relations. As an immediate step, reversing the negative impact that the Libya crisis may have on the principle of 'Responsibility to Protect' will be crucial in lessening the charge by countries in the south that the

⁴⁹ "Senegal's Wade: rebels should lead Libya transition", Reuters, 20 May 2011. It is not clear why Wade took this decision, although a possible reason is that he faces a frustrated electorate next year and needs to remain close to the West. His decision may have been on the instigation of France urging him to take a stand or at least move closer to their thinking.

⁵⁰ Ibid. The two met on the sidelines of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) forum in Zambia in June.

⁵¹ Another potential fallout of the Libyan crisis and the bad taste left over from the implementation (or perceived mis-implementation) of Resolution 1973 is its prevention of any serious action by the UNSC on Syria.

principle is less to do with protection of civilians and just another tool for the West to cover its more interventionist policy.

Finally, at the level of African diplomacy, after two major “Western” led UN Security Council resolutions and interventions in Côte d’Ivoire and Libya there is considerable unease in Africa’s pivotal organisation about the implications of these interventions, in particular whether aggrieved groupings seeking political change in other African states can mobilise external intervention to support their cause. The AU also needs to once again think through its role in conflict mediation and intervention as significant anxiety remains on the continent about its ability to manage its own crisis. Further, as a major bankroller of the AU and many African states, the shift in Libya will have reverberations on many levels, including on the leadership of the AU and the future funding of AU structures.