

The new wave of protests that has taken place in Africa has added to an already long history of struggle on the continent. These protests are significant for the range of groups that have participated in them, for the distinctive modes of protesting used as well as for what many of them have achieved. Despite the fact that the most recent wave of protests and uprisings has gone almost unnoticed in the mainstream media, many contemporary African protests have preceded the Arab Spring.

Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly's *Africa Uprising* is particularly successful in locating the current period within the longer patterns of struggle and revolt in the continent, while identifying what makes it distinctive and significant. *Africa Uprising* does a political reading of protest without disregarding the economic motivations. With this, the book embraces an analysis of protests for what they are and takes us beyond an unhelpful success/failure framework as to whether protests have achieved their aims or not. Additionally, the book offers a balanced theoretical and empirical analysis that makes it rich on both counts. The sophisticated analytical framework is centred on the concept of political society, which although, as will be analysed below, needs further development, helps us understand the motivations and the agents of these protests. The four case studies of Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan provide not only a robust elaboration of the book's main arguments but they are also significant and original in their own terms. This review would like to focus on these aspects, discussing what it means to look at patterns in protests while analysing particularities, as well as to critically analyse the concept of political society, which is central in the analysis. On the whole, its nuanced theoretical framework backed with thorough case studies makes *Africa Uprising* a fantastic contribution to the field of African politics and the sociology of protest in Africa.

Patterns and Particularities of Contemporary African Movements

Branch and Mampilly speak of a 'third wave of African protests'. This wave has sprang around the mid-2000s from the realisation that the promises of democracy and development of the 1980s and 1990s have not only not been realised but, in many parts of Africa, living conditions have worsened while states' rule has become even more violent and unaccountable (Chapter 4). Branch and Mampilly situate this wave in relation to a first wave of anti-colonial protests, and a second wave that ended with the military and single-party states and gave way to multiparty democracies. Yet, in this sense, the 1990s have been remarkably different from the 2000s. Many countries such as Angola, Sierra Leone and Togo saw the transition to multiparty democracy in the early to mid 1990s, but the recent wave of protests had not started then. As the authors note, there has been a period in which protests and social movements have been led by civil society, NGOs and single-issue-driven organisations. Though this trend continues today, what characterises the movements of the last two decades is the participation of the underclasses

(political society). What this timing does is to put into perspective the transition from anti-colonial struggles to trade unionism and peasant uprisings, to single-issue and civil society-led movements up to the present time. Their focus is on the intricate ways in which the political context, the participants and the relationship participants have with the state and among each other give us a particularly sharp view of the characteristics and variety of the different waves.

The fact that the recent wave of protests have had *political society* at their core has changed their aims and ways of protesting, aiming more for structural changes and less for reforms. By *political society*, they specifically mean urban underclasses, highlighting three aspects: the historical urban/rural divide in terms of how colonial and postcolonial rule has been exercised; the particular political relation these populations have with the state, which takes place largely through extra-legal, illegal and informal channels; and, finally, the political character of their aspirations, which separate them from the reformist aspirations of civil society. In this context, protests have primarily taken two forms: one as a *localised* protest, which tries to 'force the state to address a specific constituency's problems without necessarily addressing the conditions of the rest of society'; and the other in the form of *uprisings*, which bring together a number of constituencies, 'creating the conditions for anything up to a revolution' (p. 81). It is whenever these two unite and, even more so, when the constituencies come together under issues that represent a large spectrum of society, that they are more successful.

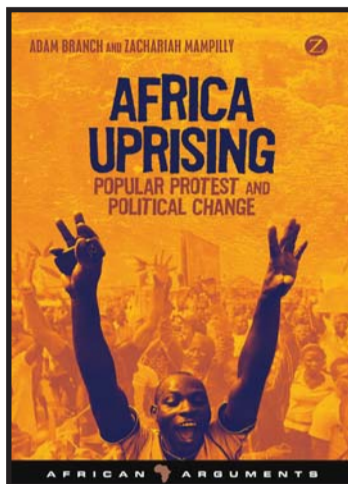
The purposeful rejection of old forms of organising reflects the need to create a space for political activity and protest for those who see themselves as threatened by both the state and powerful external actors (Rao 2012, p.12). In between these two, new forms of protest emerge that reject both international actors and states and, by default, also reject forms of organising that aim at taking state power, or enacting piecemeal reforms. Some of these aspects are shared globally. Breno Bringel and José Mauricio Domingues for instance also identify a 'third stage of modern social movements' (Bringel & Domingues 2015, p.8). For Bringel, what characterises this third stage is a combination of

Africa's Third Wave of Protests

Marta Iniguez de Heredia

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aims, plurality of methods and subjectivities and the entanglement of these movements internationally (Bringel 2015, pp.124–125). Heterogeneity is in the nature of new African social movements and, by extension, of all forms of resistance in Africa.

These movements are also contradictory in the sense that, as Larmer states, they should not be

seen as authentic representations of the marginalised, the poorest or the oppressed (2010, p.252). They are formed by a significant part of the educated middle and even elite classes, sustaining political agendas that cannot be said to represent all marginalised or disenfranchised, as well as by the unemployed and those at the margins of or outside formal political representation. Additionally, these movements are not without problems and cannot be said to be pure representations of their own demands. The movements that *Africa Uprising* focuses on largely surpass ethnic divides and to a large or lesser extent reproduce other hierarchies between urban and rural-based populations, the educated and the uneducated, gender divides, age divides, those that can access and use new technologies and social media and those who cannot, the old and the young, etc. For Branch and Mampilly, this is important for us to recognise in order not to 'romanticize' protests and understand them as 'convoluted and tension-ridden' (p. 4). They are contradictory, and as such, should be seen as heterogenous spaces of political action, where political alternatives are generated. Yet, it is what characterises these movements, and not whether they have succeeded or failed, that should be the driving force of an analysis. Branch and Mampilly do this skillfully. The book goes well beyond the paradigm of failure within which Africa, and very specifically African protests, are accounted for. Not only are African social movements generally absent in Africanist and social movements literatures, the 'stereotypical' image of Africa 'as passive, compliant and even complicit of its own suffering and exploitation' makes a focus on organised protest imperative (Larmer 2010, p.251).

'Political Society,' the Centrepiece of Contemporary African Social Movements

The concept of political society lies at the centre of the book, and thus it is worthwhile to examine in detail what it

brings to the analysis of this new wave of political movements in Africa. Much has been debated about the extent to which there is a civil society in Africa and in fact in much of the Third World (Harbeson et al. 1994; Keane 1998; Ferguson 2006). Much has also been said about how best to grasp that massive part of society that lies at the margins of political representation, employment, and formal tax-paying. The concept of political society is a step forward in understanding how different groups in society relate to the state and express their protests. But the concept needs to be developed further.

The concept is taken from Partha Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed* (2004). For Chatterjee, it is clear that civil society is a term that comes from Western notions of state-society relations and that it represents a very small sector of society in Third World countries (2004, p.37). It acknowledges the important class divisions in society, without embracing class as a category that neatly defines different groups within society or fully grasps the specific relations these groups have with the state. Branch and Mampilly, like Chatterjee, see civil society as the middle/elite classes, whose relation to the state is formal, inscribed within states' own rational and civic ways for the provision of citizens' rights (Chatterjee 2004, pp.32–39; Branch & Mampilly 2015, Ch. 2). Political society concerns the underclasses, the squatters, the electricity stealers and the slum dwellers (*Ibid.*). They are different from the working classes in that their relation to the state is hardly formalised; their access to political representation is done through informal, marginal and extra legal channels. Yet they all see that the particular ways in which civil and political society relate to each other leads to changes in the conditions of living for political society.

There are however important differences. While Chatterjee speaks of an 'entanglement' (2004, p.40), Branch and Mampilly speak of strategic cooperation between civil and political societies in particular moments. The story that Branch and Mampilly tell us is a complex one with regard to the relationship between middle classes and political society, and what this relationship does to the development and unfolding of protests. What they argue is that for a long time middle and upper classes at the forefront of civil society, single-issue campaigns, labour organisations and NGOs have neglected the participation of the underclasses. This has provoked a gap and even a confrontation between these two classes that has made several protests go awry. But the success of protest lies in the degree of cohesion and joint demands of civil and political societies.

In this regard, the examples of Nigeria and Uganda are crucial (Chapters 5 and 6 respectively). In Nigeria in 2012, the members of a newly formed 'Occupy Nigeria' movement and the members of older civil society groups joined forces in a demonstration that 'threatened to topple the government' (p. 87). However, these protests did not bring as many changes as demonstrators wanted due to the divisions in civil society and in particular the willingness of the labour movement

to go along with the government, as well as to the manipulations of the government to break up this coalition. In Uganda, the 'Walk to Work' protest drew in both political and civil society across many regions of the county, including some of the rural areas. What undermined this movement was its fragmentation 'into particularized constituencies without a common vision for progressive political change in the country' (p. 115).

Branch and Mampilly demonstrate clearly the possibilities that lie behind a coalition of different classes to demand and enact change. However, much is still to be said about other issues that affect protests. They already signal the militarised and violent repression that protests faced in Uganda in 2011 and in Ethiopia in 2005. In Nigeria in 2015 the repression of dissidents at the time of elections, added to the wave of violence by Boko Haram, greatly restricted the opportunities for protest. If the ultimate trigger of this wave of protests was the disenchantment with the hopes for democracy from the 1990s and the new links being made between political and civil society, how does the government response alter the possibilities for these to provoke real change? And how does the evolution of international social movements going through similar ups and downs affect the prospects African social movements have for change?

Branch and Mampilly see political society at the forefront of the demand for changes that affect the economic and political architecture of society. This is not dissimilar to what Chatterjee sees as the demand for greater political participation and not simple representation or better ways to implement welfare policies. Yet, while Chatterjee sees in the demand for 'how they preferred to be governed' by political society a democratic challenge (2004, p.78), Branch and Mampilly see in the protests enacted by political society the aim of the radical transformation of conditions of life (p. 21). Political Society allows Branch and Mampilly to put at the forefront the majority of the African population without falling into the romanticisation of the middle classes of both 'Afro-pessimism' and 'Afro-optimism' (p. 1).

However, a question that still remains is: who or what is political society? *Africa Uprising* accounts for the heterogeneity within political society, especially in regards to the political imaginary and the participation in protests. However, it is not clear whether ultimately political society is really formed by just or primarily young males from the outskirts of cities, or whether we should understand it in terms of a broader membership of girls, women, adults in general, and the elderly. Additionally, although Chatterjee's own examples are largely brought from the slums and outskirts of Calcutta, it is not clear that he is identifying political society just with the urban youth. By identifying political society with the urban underclasses Branch and Mampilly are narrowing down the concept unnecessarily, raising the questions of whether there is a rural political society and how rural marginal populations fit into

this picture. It is clear that the rural areas have not been absent from these protests even if the urban environment has been the main arena of these protests. Neither have women been absent from these protests; in fact the cases presented in the book reflect this. One telling example of this is the women's protest that took place on 27th October 2014 in Burkina Faso, days in advance of the big march on the 30th (All Africa 2014). Women went out with their spatulas – a utensil used to cook the maize paste. In the Burkinabe home, if a woman use this against her husband, or threatens him with it, it means that the man has lost his dignity vis-à-vis that woman, losing somewhat his authority in the house. As such, it was very symbolic for the women to go out with their spatulas; it sent a clear strong message both to Blaise Campaore and to the rest of the population that Campaore's days were over.

As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, understanding political society only or primarily in terms of the urban young male underclass contradicts the main objective of the concept of political society. Unless there are more categories for different relations between the rural and urban underclasses along the lines of gender, ethnic group, age and ability, it would tend to diminish the value of the term. This is not to disregard the fact that it is young males that mainly participate in these protests. But highlighting and analysing a sociological aspect of the composition of protests should not narrow down the conceptual lenses through which to analyse protests as a whole.

Divides that Unite?

The concept of political society also creates several divides with some tensions for the analysis. As previously mentioned, one is the division between the rural and urban. This divide exists in the human and political geography of African societies since the colonial administration created it to rule African territories and societies. This divide produced important differences in how populations relate to the state. What Branch and Mampilly argue is that the urban underclasses have seen their relation to the state take a different shape precisely due to the situation of marginality, which includes not just the lack of access to political representation and jobs but also the lack of land and community networks that are already in place in the rural environment. In fact, in terms of their aims, the authors argue that the rural underclasses have many times tried to gain greater autonomy from the state but not to challenge it (p. 22). Political society represents a challenge to the state, even if their aims do not always come out fully articulated.

Yet it is questionable that the aspirations of the rural and urban underclasses are significantly different, and what defines their relationship to the state in terms of informality and illegality does not differ that much either. Each of the cases the book focuses on illustrates that when these two have come together, the possibility of carrying out large protests and the chances of success of a protest have increased. If political society is conceptualised in terms

of the political relation that the urban underclasses have with the state and the political character of their aspirations, why does it not include the rural populations? Their aspirations should also be seen as political and to a large extent in relation to the state. In this regard, it is ultimately questionable why 'political society' identifies just urban underclasses, and not the 'rural underclasses' as if their claims were not political or as if their conditions of living and negotiations of their rights with the state did not take place. If there are differences regarding their access to material and political resources, why is there not a 'rural political society'?

The division between civil and political society is one that offers a nuanced and useful conceptual framework. When the category is made in terms of the relationship that different groups have with the state, the historical trajectory of these two groups in the rise of the modern democratic concept of the nation-state makes sense. Yet this division becomes difficult when one of the categorising elements of civil society is to be an NGO and to have more reformist conservative aspirations than political society (pp. 48-50).

The book acknowledges that political society draws a great deal from associational life. In this sense there may be a difference between, for instance, an internationally funded NGO and a 'survival' NGO, which may well be formed by members of political society. Additionally, the division in the discursive realm is also not that clear. One of the trends shown by the case studies in the book but also others that have sprung up in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Togo, Angola or South Africa, is that protests tend to start with relative conservative demands, such as: an end to corruption, the reduction of prices, respect for the rule of law, democracy, etc. In other words, claims and aspirations that civil and political society would agree upon. The point of *Africa Uprising* is to show the limitations of civil society in its aim for change, which is the step forward that political society is willing to take. However, the book needs to explain more explicitly how the jump is made from a relatively conservative political discourse to one of more radical change. This is not shown; neither it is shown how civil and political society are that far apart ideologically. The book thus leaves open the issue of civil and political society's 'entanglement', as Chatterjee would put it, at least at the bottom, and whether the real classification the book is making is largely one of class.

Seeing the examples of protests in Africa so far, a clear dividing line along class would be inaccurate as in fact they have attracted a wide range of actors. In the case of Ethiopia in the protests following the elections in 2005, Branch and Mampilly show that while intellectuals, students and professionals were part of the protests and 'voice of the opposition, it was a broader section of youth who were at the heart of the protests.' (p. 157). In other cases such as Y'en a Marre in Senegal and Revolution 2.0 in Burkina Faso in 2014, the initiators

of these movements have tended to be if not the middle class, at least the educated urban-based members. However, this does not mean that movements represent just these sectors (intellectuals, artists, journalists and members of civil society). They have extended largely to rural areas and these middle classes are different from a 'political class' (Alexander 2007, p.217; Rich Dorman 2015). It is not a 'middle class' that is necessarily interested in state power. It is a middle class whose aspirations meet those from the lower strata, including the desire to carry out ample political and social transformations. The concept of political society in the way Branch and Mampilly want to adapt it needs further elaboration in terms of how rural and urban underclasses relate to the concept and how political society organises its survival and demands in a way that takes it close to the organisational forms and aspirations of civil society.

Conclusion: Is there an 'African Uprising'?

These movements have opened a new path of political organisation in Africa, adding to wider global trends. What it means for the political and economic aspirations of the poorest people of this continent is still too early to ascertain. What needs to be acknowledged is, firstly, that these protests constitute a new wave in a long history of a continent that has never ceased to organise and protest in the quest for better conditions of living. Yet they are new in that the movements that have taken place since the mid-2000s approximately mark a dividing line between traditional forms of organising within civil society, trade unions and political parties and the open movements with a significant participation of the underclasses.

Some of them have been able to enact a complete change in governments such as those in Burkina Faso with revolution 2.0 and in Senegal with the Y'en a Marre movement. Yet, as mentioned before, this would be the wrong way to judge the 'success' of contemporary social movements. What is possible to say, and this is one of the learnings from Branch and Mampilly's book, is that they have surpassed what Harri Englund has termed a 'prison of freedom' in which previous single-issue NGO-led-type organisations were just demanding respect for human rights and not greater forms of political participation (2006). They have also signalled a change in the nature of the political demands, now being more about the procedures and structures of political and economic distribution, without necessarily leaving behind issues such as the environment, identity or issues of particular collectives. Finally, they are a reminder that Africa is not lagging behind; nor is it merely copying what is happening elsewhere. The movements that we have seen in the last few years have come before and alongside the Arab Spring and the several Occupy movements that have sprang all over the world. It is time to recognise the particularities and the trends that make African protests unique as well as part of a long trend of struggle in the world that is likely to keep growing. Branch and Mampilly's book is a great step in that direction.

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