1 | Protests and possibilities

‘Africa Rising!’ shout the magazine covers, books, movies, and advertising campaigns – all breathlessly proclaiming the dawn of a new era across Africa. No longer part of a ‘hopeless continent’, Africa’s growing economies and burgeoning middle class, it is declared, represent a true break from the past. GDP growth rates reach unprecedented heights, and foreign capital pours into oil and gas investment in East Africa. Vast new private housing colonies rise from the sea in Lagos, Nigeria, while Angola’s Isabel Dos Santos displaces Oprah Winfrey as the richest black woman in the world. Elite ‘Afropolitans’ are the continent’s new global face, and networked Kenyans work to solve everything from election violence to health care delivery with SMS messaging.

The African middle class is celebrated as both the driver and the beneficiary of today’s transformation. The African Development Bank (2011) announced that the middle class had grown to 350 million people by 2010 – but only by including all those with daily consumption expenditures of more than $2, barely enough to survive in many urban areas. A realistically defined middle class would comprise only a narrow sliver of Africa’s population, set against a backdrop in which nearly half of all Africans live in extreme poverty, with their numbers growing (UN 2014).

Yesterday’s ‘Afro-pessimism’ and today’s ‘Afro-optimism’ equally misrepresent the actual political transformations unfolding across the continent. Both leave out the vast majority of Africans, dismissing them as helpless victims or ignoring them in favour of the new African elite. This oversight is indefensible. For almost a decade now, huge numbers of people from across Africa’s urban populations have been taking to their cities’ streets to demand change. Popular protest has been sweeping the continent, erupting in dozens of countries from Egypt to South Africa, Ethiopia to Senegal, Sudan to Angola. These protesters are seeking to fundamentally transform Africa’s political and economic inequities. Yet there has been little effort to understand how they see their continent today or what their visions might be for Africa’s future. Perhaps we need to abandon the simplistic narrative of Africa Rising and instead focus on Africa’s Uprisings.

Africa is not alone in experiencing an upsurge in popular protest, as protest now occupies the centre of the global political stage. Worldwide, people are taking to the streets, giving new life to a form of political action often thought of as a historical relic in today’s era of expanding security states and the apparent triumph of global elites. The Arab Awakening, the anti-austerity protests of Europe’s indignados, the Occupy movement in the US and beyond, the anti-corruption protests across both rural and urban Asia, the students, middle class, poor, and indigenous in streets and squares across Latin America – all these are providing new inspiration for many who had lost faith in the potential for transformative popular struggles.

In the debate over today’s global protest, various positions have been staked out. The protests are cast as the ultimate challenge to capitalism, a rejection of liberal democracy, an uprising by the ‘multitude’, the work of social-media-savvy youth, or an outburst by frustrated middle classes. The most hyperbolic accounts lack awareness of national and regional histories outside of the West, and none is immediately helpful in comprehending the recent wave of popular protest in Africa, which has arisen in response to a distinct conjuncture of economic, political, and social developments.

Indeed, Africa has been largely ignored within the conversation over today’s global protest wave. This silence derives in part from long-standing Western images of Africa as too rural, too traditional, and too bound by ethnicity for modern political protest to arise. Such prejudices also mean that those few African protests that do make it into the international press tend to be dismissed as riots or looting. Violence is often seen as the sole driver of
political change in Africa by media fixated on warlords, child soldiers, and humanitarian intervention. Even when popular protest on the African continent is deemed politically momentous, as it was in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, it is turned into an Arab Spring, divorced from its geographical location, with analysts asking whether Africa might ‘follow’ with an awakening of its own (Ford 2012; Juma 2011).

Given Africa’s long exclusion from Western narratives of world history, the continent’s current absence from this debate should not surprise us. However, it is entirely unjustified. The wave of popular protests in African countries, north and south, east and west, demands to be taken seriously and not discounted as merely an echo of protest elsewhere. In this book we emphasize the need to look inward to Africa’s own past and its own history of protest before looking outward to events in the rest of the world in order to explain today’s continental protest wave. Today’s uprisings build on a history of African protest that stretches back to the anti-colonial struggle, a legacy that has survived despite overwhelming odds. This book seeks to place protest in Africa within the broader debate about today’s outbreak of protest around the world – but it does so by discerning what makes that protest specifically African.

Neither analysts nor activists can afford to ignore this current upsurge of protest. The two previous major protest waves – those of the late colonial period and of the late 1980s to early 1990s – preceded the most important continent-wide political transformations of the last hundred years. The first culminated in the end of colonial rule, and the second marked the end of many single-party and military states and the establishment of multiparty democracies throughout Africa. Likewise, today’s wave of protest should encourage us to ask what political transformations it may foretell.

Just as it is indefensible to dismiss or ignore popular protest in Africa, we cannot afford to romanticize protest either. Protest should not be seen as part of a perennial struggle of ‘the people’ against colonial, post-colonial, or neo-colonial political oppression. Protest occurs in a convoluted and tension-ridden social reality and is comprised of forces whose politics are themselves complex, fraught with antagonisms and limited by contradictions. Protest takes many forms and can have different meanings depending on who is involved, what their demands are, and how they relate to other social and political groups. Even as protest challenges state power, it is structured by that power and so reveals both political possibilities and political limitations. Protest can usher in new orders or founder on the old ones, give birth to unifying demands for justice and democracy or entrench political divisions and dilemmas.

From this perspective, the North African protests of 2011 do not reveal some supposed contrast between the north and the rest of the continent. Instead, they speak to the continued vitality of long histories of protest throughout Africa – just as the turmoil in Libya and Egypt at the time of this writing is a reminder of the grave challenges, internal and external, that popular demands for political change face everywhere. While in the West it may be conventional to imagine the Sahara as an impenetrable barrier dividing the Arab North from the rest of Africa, or even to exclude parts of Southern Africa from the ‘real’ Africa, we take a different approach. We maintain that what has occurred across North Africa involves important similarities to and continuities with events unfolding elsewhere throughout the continent. In the pages ahead we avoid these geographic divisions and instead speak of all of Africa.

This continental approach allows us to better understand how political phenomena can spread across national borders and regions, even leaping across vast distances from Egypt to Uganda, Senegal to Malawi, South Africa to Nigeria. This book explores some of these continental histories of protest. Our focus is on the most recent wave – emerging slowly in the middle of the 2000s, cresting in 2011, and rippling widely into the present – a period within which we place the North African uprisings. In order to contextualize this ongoing third wave of protest, we first look back to the two previous waves, discovering what they tell us about the politics of African protest and what they suggest about the possibilities for future political transformation.

Protest and political imagination
In 1996, at the age of 57, the eminent Nigerian political scholar, Claude Ake, died in a highly suspicious plane crash that killed all on board. Sani Abacha, the Nigerian dictator, was rumoured to have orchestrated the crash in revenge for Ake’s scathing critiques of his regime and for supporting pro-democracy movements. A keen first-hand observer of Nigeria’s unsuccessful struggle for democracy in 1993, Ake remained, until his death, optimistic about Africa’s future, writing that “the pressures for democratization are so strong that for most of Africa it is no longer a question of whether there will be a democratic transition but when” (1995: 135).

Ake’s optimism in the face of repeated disappointment not only provides a relevant political lesson but also suggests an important analytical approach that can provide a corrective to the present dominant framework for understanding protest. This framework tends to focus only on the failures of protest movements, especially the disparity between their lofty promise and their modest achievements in bringing about political change. In this view, the anti-colonial struggle brought independence but set the stage for the depredations of post-colonial dictatorships, while the second wave of protest brought an end to single party states and ushered in political and economic liberalization but did little to effect substantive change in the lives of most Africans.

Today’s wave of protest, from this vantage point, has even less to show for itself, for it has largely failed to bring about even formal political changes. In North Africa the narrative of a ‘winter’ following the ‘spring’ has gained currency, Tunisia remains polarized by political assassination and governmental infighting; Libya finds militias controlling large parts of the country; and Egypt’s optimism has been displaced by a brutal military takeover. Looking ahead to our cases, we have seen Nigeria’s protests peter out amid factional squabbles between organizers, Uganda’s movement crushed by President Yoweri Museveni, Ethiopian protesters facing a newly repressive state, and Sudan’s movements unable to generate sufficient support to pose a threat to the government. Although we must note exceptions, such as the political transitions brought about by the protests in Senegal, Guinea, Niger, Madagascar, and, most recently, Burkina Faso, for most of the continent the protest wave seems to have had little impact on state politics.

It is indisputable that, again and again, protests across Africa seem unable to effect substantive reforms in national politics despite their success in bringing tens of thousands of people into the streets. However, the commonly drawn conclusion – that protests are meaningful only if they are able to realize concrete reforms in national politics as demanded by the protesters – is not accurate. In this view, most of Africa’s protests, in which demands are often multiple, unclear, and rarely entirely realized, would be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Ake can help point us towards an alternative to this restrictive understanding and its tendency to dismiss African protest because of what it fails to accomplish instead of taking seriously what it does achieve. Ake remained sceptical of the relevance of formal democratization to the lives of most Africans, a scepticism vindicated by the repeated upsurge of protest despite reform. For him, formal democratization was too often a subterfuge undertaken by African autocrats to curry favour with international audiences and co-opt popular energies through superficial institutional remedies. Ake instead emphasized the importance of popular democratic movements regardless of any specific liberal reforms they might introduce. He refused to measure Africa’s progress according to formal indices of democracy and suggested instead that the real value of protest movements was in their effect on the political consciousness and imagination of African societies (ibid.). Popular protests, in his conception, are a mechanism through which Africa’s peoples can achieve ‘self-realization’ by inventing new visions of democracy and development in which popular interests come first.

With Ake’s advice in mind, we do not spend our time in this book lamenting the failure of protest to effect formal political change. Instead, we focus on the often dramatic developments that accompany protest in popular organization, political consciousness, and political imagination. As diverse social groups seek to understand and challenge their own oppression, they reveal new political possibilities whose resonance can reach far beyond their place of origin, transforming people’s understandings of politics nationally, regionally, and even globally.

This approach requires nuanced understanding of the social forces involved in protest so as to grasp the diverse transformations that collective action can bring about. It demands that those taking to the streets be contextualized within African political history and not be taken merely as representatives of
universal economic or political identities. The politics of protest in Africa cannot be read from models imported from other historical experiences of what “proper” protest is supposed to look like. The political relevance of large numbers of people taking to the streets to effect change in their lives must be discerned from those people’s specific political context, from their particular historical experiences and present conditions. Many of the analytical distinctions that are used to understand protest elsewhere — the division between political and economic protest, between demonstrations and rioting, between violence and non-violence, between direct and indirect action — may not be productive in analysing protest in Africa.

This book thus seeks out what is specific to African protest. This allows us to avoid preconceptions of what protest should look like, preconceptions that are often a hindrance to understanding the true extent and relevance of Africa’s uprisings. For instance, many analysts — including the influential theorist of non-violent action, Gene Sharp (2005) — tend to privilege protests that conform to a ‘civil society’ model. According to this model, primarily derived from the Western experience, protests are organized, disciplined, and non-violent and should work symbolically within civil society to pressure the state into reform based on clear political demands. Forms of protest that diverge from this model — as the ongoing protest wave in Africa seems to do — tend to be ignored as irrelevant. Likewise, the full extent of protest’s political repercussions may be missed when those repercussions fall outside the expectations of the civil society model. Instead of this limiting approach, analysis should start from political reality in Africa and locate protest within that reality rather than presuming that protest is a universal phenomenon with a fixed politics. Protest should be historicized, and theory should be built upon the actual experience of protest across the continent.

Dilemmas of protest

A principal argument of this book is that there exists a historical continuity to popular protest in Africa, one based in the persistence of the social and political structures shaping the urban milieu from which protest arises. These structures have their origin in colonial rule and the stark divides it enforced. Under colonialism, urban areas were violently separated from rural areas, and then each was fragmented further. The urban was divided into a small, relatively privileged, elite and working class on one side, opposed to a large underclass subject to constant state coercion on the other. The rural was divided through the institutionalization and enforcement of tribalism, leading to deep ethnic fragmentation. Frantz Fanon put it most succinctly: “the colonial world is a world divided into compartments” (1963: 37). This led those living in the different compartments to have fundamentally different political and economic concerns, expectations, identities, and forms of politics. These structural divides remained the foundation of colonial and then post-colonial rule, and even now any effort to reform the state has to deal with them or run the risk of reinforcing these divides and the inequalities they support (Mamdani 1996).

The history of protest, therefore, represents the history of collective political efforts that are shaped by this legacy of fragmentation and that attempt to understand and overcome it, with greater or lesser success. It is a history in which the main actors — urban political and economic elites, the working class, the underclass, and rural populations — recur in each of the three waves of protest, even as the specific details of their identities, political imaginations, and relations may shift over time. Throughout this history, popular protests have run up against two constant national political dilemmas: how to overcome political divides within the urban, and how to overcome the political divide between the urban and the rural. Our focus within this history of protest is on the urban underclass, a group often marginal to accounts of popular protest despite their centrality to all three waves and their key importance for future political change. By working towards a theorization of the politics of this urban ‘political society’, as we term it, insight can be gained into the broader possibilities and limitations of protest and politics in Africa today.

Additional dilemmas obstruct the path protest must follow to bring about political change. Since the colonial era, the urban underclass has faced dramatic state violence, especially in response to any effort on its part at political mobilization. This prevalence of violence can make non-violent protest
on the part of urban political society a near-suicidal strategy, as Fanon relates. Overcoming state violence, while not letting its own violence eviscerate protest of its inclusive and transformative potential, has thus been a dilemma for political society mobilization from the beginning. It also means the line between violent and non-violent collective action will have to be rethought in the case of political society uprisings.

Finally, the dilemmas facing African protest are, of course, not all internal. The international political and economic order also deeply influences, and often constrains, popular protest, as it does African politics generally. Since the inception of colonialism, democratic struggles in Africa have had to contend with international forces that systematically subvert the conditions for democracy and violently undermine the terrain on which democratic movements can work. Destructive international interference, whether in the form of colonialism, Cold War clientelism, structural adjustment, ‘humanitarian’ interventions, or the war on terror, presents a dilemma for all African political struggles including popular protest. Indeed, it is often unclear how much substantive change can even be realized on the national level without corresponding changes on the international level.

What makes protest particularly challenging and exciting to study is that it represents a moment in which national political questions are suddenly raised and thrown into the midst of public attention. Protest represents a time when the unpredictable, unknown, and unforeseen suddenly take centre stage (Arendt 1990). It is a realm of contingency even as it takes place within fixed structures and conditions. Narrow protests turn popular, visionary leaders emerge to give voice to what everyone knew but no one would say, and novel possibilities arise as new answers to old dilemmas are put forth in practice. Protest can also be a time when existing inequalities and divisions are further entrenched, with urban ethnic riots standing as a stark example.

Protest, therefore, should not be judged according to whether it achieves its explicit demands, for those demands often change in the course of the protest or may never have been directly stated. Instead, protest should be understood according to how it attempts to transform the national political questions that structure state power and how that protest answers, avoids, or is torn apart by the deep political dilemmas that may require resolution for democratic change to take hold. Our study is therefore concerned with the evolving political imaginations forged by the divergent forces involved in African protests and with the efforts made to transcend the structural dilemmas out of which protest is born.

What lies ahead

This book is in two parts. The first, comprising Chapters 2 through 4, proposes a history of the three major waves of protest in Africa: the anti-colonial protests in the late 1940s and 1950s, the anti-austerity protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the ongoing wave stretching from Tunisia to South Africa. As noted, the two earlier waves helped usher in the two most important periods of widespread political change on the continent over the last century. By examining each wave individually, we expose the debates and questions that resonate through time.

Although focusing on three waves, we recognize that significant protests can be found outside of these periods. Prior to the nationalist mobilizations of the 1940s, for example, as early as 1915 the Reverend John Chilembwe led a popular uprising in contemporary Malawi against British colonial rule challenging its land policies and forced conscription of soldiers. And in 1929 thousands of women in contemporary Abia state, Nigeria, participated in an extraordinary month-long protest against British colonial authorities. After the end of the colonial era, the 1964 October Revolution in Sudan, the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, and the protests in southern Africa of the late 1990s all fall outside the three waves, as does the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, a sustained popular movement that strongly influenced subsequent African protests. While we recognize the importance of these episodes of protest, our interest, rather, is in the way in which these major waves revealed continent-wide political developments and dilemmas and led to continent-wide political change.

Chapter 2 introduces and develops the key category of ‘political society’, which we use to help understand the politics of popular urban protest. The ‘Accra riots’ of 1948 stand as a seminal event that signals the arrival of political society as the central actor within African protest. By examining the
debate between Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah over how to understand political society’s participation in the struggle for national independence, we explore the politics of a constituency whose role in African decolonization has often been marginalized or subsumed within the campaigns of nationalist political parties. The second chapter thus lays the theoretical groundwork for the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 explores the wave of protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which began against structural adjustment policies and ended with the broad inception of multiparty politics. It explores the repercussions of the breakdown of the ‘developmental’ state in Africa and the ambiguities of the celebrated transition to democracy. Here again, political society emerges as the key constituency fueling the protests, only to find its demands for a transformation of social, economic, and political life co-opted by more formalized actors within civil society who demanded not transformation but mere electoral reforms.

Chapter 4 introduces the contemporary protest wave, charting briefly the crisis of economic neoliberalism and liberal multiparty democracy that is giving rise to today’s surge of popular resistance. We document over ninety popular protests in forty countries during the 2005–11 period, most of which have unfolded with little international attention – with the exception of the protests that occurred in four North African states in 2011.

The second part of the book, Chapters 5 through 8, provides detailed case studies of four recent protest movements in different parts of the continent, all of which are part of this ongoing third wave. Chapter 5 explores the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement (possibly the largest popular protest in the country’s history) through a close reading of the tense relations between labour and grassroots activism as the protests came together and then fell apart. This chapter also delves into the complementary relationship between artists and political society, focusing on the imaginative possibilities opened through this engagement. Chapter 6 examines the politics of the 2011 Walk to Work protests in Uganda, which erupted in the wake of disputed elections. To understand these protests as merely the product of opposition machinations, however, ignores the way in which they gained strength only as they transcended party politics and transformed themselves into a focal point around which anger within political society found expression.

Chapter 7 looks at the 2005 protests in Ethiopia, a massive urban uprising that briefly threatened one of Africa’s most durable regimes. Put down through a brutal application of force that foreshadowed the repressive tactics employed by many African states in response to the current wave, the protests nonetheless triggered a major shift in state practice. Chapter 8 delves into the ongoing Girifna and pro-democracy protests in Sudan, placing them in the context of previous popular urban uprisings. By illustrating the divisions between urban and rural and within the urban that defined the protests, the chapter explores the attempt by students and other civil society actors to marry their efforts with those of political society, and its mixed results. Finally, the Conclusion returns to the question of how the African experience of protest can contribute to debates about today’s upsurge of protest around the world.

The future of the current wave of African protests is uncertain: but what is certain is that, even as they ebb and flow, they will not end soon. Instead, they are likely to take an increasingly central political role precisely because there is no end in sight to the conditions giving rise to them. Without fundamental transformations in the state and in the economy, transformations that popular movements have demanded and continue to demand, protest will not fade away. As threats to life and livelihood mount globally, perhaps Africa’s experience with popular protest can open up alternative possibilities to intellectuals engaged in the debates over today’s global wave of protest. More important, it may point to alternative ways forward for activists around the world who are engaged in the quest for political and economic change.