

Middle East and North African Revolts and Revolutions: Is Africa Immune?

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Is Africa immune from the contagion of revolts and revolutions raging in the Arab world and the north of the continent? This has been a raging question with various debates and opinions being enunciated by various pundits on why Africa has not caught the bug of revolts and revolutions in Middle East and North African (MENA). Indeed, the situation presents a contradictory picture. You have the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), having worse of every economic and social problem facing MENA, but still having the continent's ruling class, which superintend over these problems, intact in power. While capitalism is still intact, the grip of global capital is still strong on the continent's political economy.

Indeed, the facts are grim. In 2008, the headcount index for international poverty line of US\$2.00 a day stood at 13.9% for MENA against 69.2% in SSA.^[1] While SSA's average real GDP per capita stood at just US\$2,025, it was US\$6,478 in the revolting MENA region in 2009. Even in terms of inequality, SSA seems to be much worse at 45.4 percent as against MENA's 38.2 percent. Aside these is the collapse of public infrastructures and social services, coupled with entrenched corrupt regimes that only recycle themselves in power, under the guise of fraudulent western democracy. All of these tend to suggest, according to some pundits, that the MENA revolutions are not rooted in socio-economic problems but are products of authoritarian rules (or search for democracy by the youths) - a topic we shall return to later. In addition, with these facts, it is claimed by some that Africa has inbuilt anti-revolutionary structures and mechanisms such as ethnic diversities, religious divisions, regular elections, etc that make revolutions and revolts unpopular in the region.

All of these arguments are mere excuse to cover the revolutionary potential of the region, undermine the international character of the MENA revolts and downplay the impact of capitalist dislocation of the region. These arguments, mostly bourgeois, tend to inoculate the working people and youths from taking the road of mass struggle and uprising taken by their brothers and sisters in MENA. It is worth stating that Arabs had previously been portrayed as docile and not revolutionary by various capitalist pundits. They were said to be comfortable with dictatorship and religious fundamentalism because, according to these pundits, of their cultural outlook. Indeed, to underline the depth of these illusory excuses, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, stated few days before the Egyptian revolution broke out that the Tunisian situation could not occur in Egypt because to her, stability is the second name of Mubarak's Egypt. Just few days after, the story changed. Egyptian masses through their actions made Mrs. Clinton eat her words. Many economists, relying on favourable economic and social data have portrayed MENA as a stable region on the path of growth. This was the story we were told of Ben Ali's Tunisia, prior to wind of revolt that blew

the regime away. The revolts and uprisings in the MENA region have shattered these illusions.

These pro-capitalist analysts forget easily that between 2007 and 2009, national protests were features of the so-called hitherto 'conservative' and 'religious' Middles East, in response to rising food prices and worsening living conditions.[\[2\]](#) Indeed, the history of many a MENA country is that of mass movements, radicalization and left-wing politics, especially during the independence and anti-colonial eras of the early to mid 20th century in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Libya, etc. But the bourgeois apologists do not see these pictures; they only reckon with still pictures of the present, and not the process. What capitalist mouthpieces do not know is that mass movements are no respecter of economic statistics or assumed strength of the state repressive apparatus, which are wrongly presumed as symbols of stability. These pundits consider mass movement as a static body which can be seen from a cliff, forgetting that revolution, just like motion picture, is a connection of several still pictures connected together to make a lasting impression. As each still picture does not make a real meaning, so the motion picture does not make full meaning without a full understanding of the role of each still picture in relation to each other.

The same pundits who consider SSA as not revolutionary forget easily that the history of Africa is that of mass movement: against slave trade, colonialism, and neo-liberalism. Indeed, the last twenty years since the end of Cold War saw mass movements developing in Africa. Many of these movements, while demanding change in economic structures, were labeled as mere democratic struggles. Many were influenced by imperialism to protect its capitalist economic interests, while others were diverted to religious, ethnic and tribal struggles, not thanks to imperialist divisive partitioning of the regions and ethnic politics favoured by imperialism and its multinational corporations in the regions. From Nigeria to Ghana, Benin Republic, Togo, Kenya, etc, many mass movements that emerged since the late 1980's have been influenced by imperialism and placed under controlled leadership with a view to achieving stability. Interestingly, the same imperialism supported or propped up many of the sit-tights and dictators, against whom the people revolted. In many other countries, imperialist politics led to mass resistance degenerating to ethnic strives and wars as seen in Liberia, DR Congo, Angola and Mozambique, Ethiopia/Eritrea, etc.

The current revolts and revolutions in MENA furthermore mirror in many instances similar ones in SSA in the 1990's where mass movements of workers and the poor rose up against unprecedented neo-liberal policies unleashed, under repressive, authoritarian and high corrupt pro-imperialist local rulers, by global capitalism. The continent was held down by the shackles of debts repayment and servicing, which saw the continent paying \$260 billion to service loan of \$270 billion, yet still owing \$300 billion to its western creditors. This meant the continent's economy being opened to global capitalist vampires, in conjunction with local rulers and business class, leading to over \$1 trillion in wealth plundering[\[3\]](#) since 1970. Unfortunately, these movements, which cut across the continent in varied forms, were manipulated by imperialism as pro-democracy movements, with a view to limiting their socio-economic impact. In this period, Arabs were also considered, just as Africans are now being portrayed, as being incapable of revolting against their sit-tight rulers. This underscores the absence of revolutionary party of the working class, and the bankruptcy of the leadership of trade union movements in many African countries.

Many of the movements in the 1990's were also manipulated by local rulers, with active

backing and support of imperialism, into ethnic divisions. Indeed, it need be stressed the role of imperialist divisions and ethnic politics played by corrupt pro-capitalist political and economic class. Based on the neo-colonial economic arrangement, many African countries depend on royalty from mineral exploitation and agricultural activities by rapacious multinational corporations. For adequate profit making, the multinational corporations and their home governments play active roles in local politics with the aim of maintaining economic and political status quo favourable to their businesses. This involves manipulating politics in favour of ethnic divisions and buying over local labour leaders.

Indeed, in the past one decade, many African countries have been convulsed with mass movements against worsening living conditions and undemocratic rules. Many of these movements, as a result of absence of revolutionary leadership, coupled with the bankruptcy of labour movement in many countries, have taken many outlooks. For instance, many elections held in Africa in the last thirteen years have seen development of mass movements against ruling regimes (many of which want to remain in power) as seen in Kenya, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Djibouti, Mozambique, etc. Unfortunately, many of the players in the elections are mainly agents of capitalism. This in itself reflects on one side the readiness of mass of the people to seek change to their conditions using available means. On the other hand, it shows the necessity of a clear-cut revolutionary leadership, and the building of a pan-national (and in fact international), labour movement in these countries. Since the beginning of the Great Capitalist Recession in 2008, there has been rise in struggles of workers, youth and the poor in sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, miners, leading other strata of workers, have undertaken mass struggles and uprising against capitalist exploitations. In Nigeria, highly exploited working class and youth suspended the Jonathan government in mid-air in the one week of mass protest against hike in fuel prices. Africans have shown that they are not passive. Similarly, in Cameroun, Ghana, Uganda, Malawi, etc. mass of oppressed people are challenging the ruling class' right to rule. Indeed, they have drawn inspiration from the Arab revolts and Occupy Movements.

While there are definitely differences in social, economic and political nature of each country and even region, the arguments of ethnic divisions (as a factor against revolts) are simply outlandish as pan-national protests movements in Nigeria and elsewhere have shown. In fact, some of the movements that have developed in many African countries, prior to and after the MENA revolts, have been more massive and far reaching than in some of the MENA countries. For instance, the mass movement against hike in food prices in Mozambique in 2008 and the protest against fuel price increase in Nigeria, among several others, have shown what mass movements can do. The electoral protests in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Zimbabwe, etc, while confused and in some instances, violent, reflect the search for a way out of capitalist impoverishment and unmitigated suffering. The electoral defeats of ruling regimes in countries like Senegal follow a similar pattern. Unfortunately, the various opposition political classes actually represent the other side of the ruling class, defending the same capitalist policies, if not worse. In many instances, the so-called opposition figures or platforms are actually offshoots of the ruling regime. They mostly become opposition during struggle for spoils of office.

All of these show on one hand, the terrible role of imperialism in Africa, and on the other, the absence of a revolutionary party of the working class with a clear-cut socialist alternative plan of economy. Many 'socialist', 'communist', 'Marxist' and social democratic parties, based on the collapse of Stalinism, have been transformed into pro-capitalist parties. Even before they collapsed ideologically, their false policy of Stalinism, had isolated

them. Therefore, their transformation not only worsened their case, but also led to degeneration of politics into divisive ethno-religious tendencies, with various strands of corrupt capitalist politicians and their foreign backers holding sway.

Flowing from this analysis is that, as against the excuse that Africans are immune from revolts and revolutions happening in MENA countries, Africans have shown their readiness, not only now but also since the 1990s, to change their conditions. Indeed, the movements are in process. The outburst of mass movement that will engulf Africa, and indeed the whole world is underway. The question is not whether Africa is immune from mass revolt. Inasmuch as the current bankrupt capitalist system continues to exist, with its worst form being witnessed in Africa, surely the spectre of revolution continues to haunt the ruling class globally. The real questions are: When will this happen, and will these imminent revolutions end the rule of capital, and enthrone a genuine democratic socialist society, where societies' resources will be used to transform the lives of humans on an exponential basis?

This Article is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, Revolts in the Maghreb: MENA revolts and revolutions in the context of Faltering Global Capitalism.

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This article is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, Revolts in the Maghreb: Analysing Revolts and Revolutions in MENA in the Context of Faltering Global Capitalism

Kola Ibrahim, a graduate of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria is a labour and youth activist. He was a student activist both on campus and in the national students' movement – a role that earned him victimizations by the government and pro-establishment university administrations. He has written many articles and comments on national and international issues, which have appeared in many local and international newspapers, news magazines and journals – print and electronic. He has also written and published two books on the political economy of Nigeria: *Revolt against Fuel Price Hike in Nigeria (2012): A Socialist Perspective* and *Minimum Wage Struggle in Nigeria: The Need for a Revolutionary Workers' Movement (2012)*. He has also been active in labour and youths campaigns and struggles, ever since his student days. He works with Campaign for Democratic and Workers' Rights (CDWR); is a leader of the Education Rights Campaign (ERC) and a member of the Socialist Party of Nigeria (SPN). He is a socialist of Trotskyist tendency.

[1] Mthuli Ncube and John C. Anyanwu, *Inequality And Arab Spring Revolutions In North*

[2] As a result of fall in world food stock, exacerbated by the movement of peasantry from rural areas to urban centres; conversion of arable lands for production of bio-fuel and chemical crops; climatic change and increasing fuel prices globally, there was increasing food prices of up to 100 percent. This is most worrisome in third world countries in Africa – most of which, though agrarian only produce for export and indeed concentrate more on cash crops, totally controlled by big farmers – and food deficient countries especially in the Middle East and North Africa. This triggered massive food riots across the world including such countries as Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, etc. in 2008 and 2009 (See Kola Ibrahim, World Food Crisis: Imperative of Working Class Alternative, www.pambazuka.org, 2008). This coupled with capitalist economic dislocation and rising crude oil prices, only led to inflation and subsequently unemployment, falling real income of the working population. This was accentuated by the global economic crisis that has led to economic problems for millions of people in not only the third world but also in the advanced capitalist countries.

[3] James K. Boyce and Léonce Ndikumana, Capital Flight from Sub-Saharan African Countries: Updated Estimates, 1970 – 2010, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, October 2012

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