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Lessons from Street Protests as a Peacemaking Process*

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Introduction

Across the African continent, citizens have challenged their governments to demand better-functioning democracies and improved socioeconomic conditions. The people's uprising in Sudan, which began in December 2018, is the most recent example. This wave of activism has led to the rise of contentious politics, complete with demonstrations, strikes, and even military coups, which has transformed "the street" into a site of protest and peacebuilding. This paper argues that peacebuilding scholars and practitioners must take "the street" seriously as a locus for building peace, and develop new strategies where critical citizens can effectively challenge their government and demand change. What do we know about “street peacebuilders” or street protests as a peacemaking process?

The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) is a continent-wide network of African policy, research, and academic organizations that works with the Wilson Center’s Africa Program to bring African knowledge and perspectives to U.S., African, and international policy on peacebuilding in Africa. Established in 2011 and supported by the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the project provides avenues for African researchers and practitioners to engage with, inform, and exchange analyses and perspectives with U.S., African, and international policymakers in order to develop the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches to achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

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There is an important body of literature on popular culture (music, theater, art, sport, etc.) as a means of protest and resistance against oppression. Much has also been written on street demonstrations as a mechanism for peacebuilding, notably the U.S. civil rights movement.

However, the street protests and "street peacebuilders" that we have witnessed in recent years in Africa—for example in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Sudan, and Mali—seem to be different from what has occurred on other continents. African scholars and policymakers involved in peacebuilding must capture the spirit and rationale behind these street protests, which seem more effective in toppling authoritarian regimes than military coups, and better understand how peace can be restored.

This paper investigates this phenomenon in Africa by posing the following critical questions: What is driving the call for change amongst Africa's citizenry? Who are the street peacebuilders? What are their methods? Finally, what can we conclude about the actions and achievements of street peacebuilders?

Emergence of Peacebuilders in Africa

Several factors help explain the emergence of "the street" as a site of African protests and a new peacemaking platform. Overall, anti-democratic conditions have fed the rise of popular revolutions.[1] Several longstanding authoritarian regimes that neglected the destabilizing power of popular protest have fallen. Their illegitimacy was amplified over time by systematic violations of their people's human rights and civil liberties.[2] As a result of the excessive concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the ruling elite, most of the population remained poor. Widespread poverty helped fuel desperate bursts for democratic change.

However, the appropriation of the street by peacemaking protesters is also driven by some particular conditions. Indeed, unlike previous iterations of protest, now wider media coverage is helping to spread the cause. The mass distribution of information on social networks[3] makes it possible to connect and coordinate protesters as never before.

It is difficult to create changes with a hostile army opposition. The street has become a last option for those directly affected by repression, especially the youth. Typical within such movements is the emergence of a figurehead of protest, who serves as a role model. The recent case of Alaa Salah[4] is a case in point—a protest leader who became a figurehead for the Sudanese movement—someone who seems to embody all the hopes and dreams of the protesters.

The Critical Actors of Street Peacebuilding

Street peacebuilding has emerged through a large domestic political community devoted to democratic principles such as freedom, the rule of law, and good governance. Recent uprisings have been led by neither the political opposition nor the army; instead they have been driven by the youth, who were spontaneously drawn to the protests or organized through civil society groups or student unions. Men and women of every social strata and ethnic group have joined the uprisings. By doing so, citizens have demonstrated that they are becoming critical actors against undemocratic regimes; that the power belongs to the people; and that they are no longer a mere collection of polarized ethnic communities being manipulated by politicians. Rather, they are a nation taking responsibility for their own future.[5]

In step with young people, the literary, sporting, and artistic elite have become involved, too, and have served to legitimize the cause, both locally and internationally. There are also civil society organizations and political opposition parties involved, though there is always the risk with the latter that their intentions

might come at the expense of the population.

It is also important to note that, in some cases, the sympathy of an important portion of the army and the police toward the street protesters is critical. Their sympathy toward the protesters at crucial junctures can force the resignation of the ruling leaders.[6] Usually, security forces switch to the side of the demonstrators when they are also beneficiaries of the demand for justice. Otherwise, they remain hostile to the demonstrators. This is why it is important for protest leaders to communicate with the security forces so that the cause of their struggle can be understood and accepted.

Street Peacebuilders' Actions

Out of the various uprisings Africa has witnessed in the past decade, from the "Arab Spring"[7] to the uprising in Burkina Faso or, more recently, uprisings in Mali, Sudan, and Algeria, similarities between the unfolding of street-originated protests in each can be identified.

In most cases, protests are triggered by a controversial event, which could be a decision or action taken by the regime, or an isolated action resulting from politics shaped by the regime. In Tunisia as well as in Egypt, protest was sparked by the death of a citizen. In the first case, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, self-immolated in December 2010 (he died on 4 January 2011) in protest against harassment by the local police, who vowed to shut down his business. In Egypt, people took the street after the death of Khalid Said, a 28-year-old man, after a firefight with police. In Burkina Faso, the uprising came to life when parliamentarians declared they would change the constitution to allow President Blaise Compaoré, then in office for 27 years, to stand for another presidential term. In Algeria, the mere announcement of President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's decision to compete for his fifth straight presidential term sparked revolt. In Sudan, the demonstrators took the street to protest the announcement of emergency austerity measures. Likewise, protesters in Mali took to the streets to protest against the perceived failures of President Ibrahim Keïta's regime in tackling the dire economy and eight-year jihadist conflict.[8]

In all of these cases, the demonstrators took to the street spontaneously and were not pushed by an ideology-based or confessional-based motivation. We can now assume that they were led by a thirst for change.

Protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Gambia were generally peaceful, comprised of demonstrations and various acts of civil disobedience. It is only in Burkina Faso that demonstrators used spontaneous violence by burning the parliament building and some regime leaders' houses. In all cases, demonstrators faced violent military and police repression. In Egypt, protesters defied the regime for 17 days before President Hosni Mubarak caved in and stepped down. It took 28 days for Tunisians to oust President Ben Ali. In Sudan, it required about 8 months to oust President Omar al-Bashir.

The extensive use of social media is another similarity between the different street-based processes of peacebuilding. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were used widely. In Gambia, an exiled singer and politician played a key role in pushing people to defend their rights, using Facebook. The use of social media helped to popularize individuals on the ground, and turn them into "symbols" and "heroes" of the protests, such as the unarmed Burkinabe man photographed challenging two soldiers during the protest, which went viral globally. Social media has helped prompt the support of the United Nations and African Union for street protests in many cases, sometimes aiding the resignation of leaders.

Street-based peacebuilding has become an effective way to depose oppressive leaders. But real change means the long-term bedding down of democracy and respect for human rights. Are countries that have

gone through profound street peacebuilding movements on track to reach this objective?

Outcomes of the Street Peacebuilding Movement

The street demonstrations witnessed in Africa during the past decade have aimed to oust regimes and establish peace. But this has only been the immediate, short-term objective. Protesters have sought something greater. They are driven by the idea of a better society—more democracy and freedom of speech, better life conditions, access to education, and less corruption.

Each country has its specific cultural and political context, but it is clear that there were long-term motivating factors that are consistent across cases. We do not know yet how successful they will be achieving their long-term goals.

After the ousting of the leader, typically there follows a transitional period, followed by elections to allow people to choose their new leader. In many cases, transitional councils or governments took much longer to organize elections than was necessary because their own objective was to retain power.[9]

What changes have we witnessed in terms of human rights protection, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement? The experience has been different across the many cases of street protests. In Libya and Egypt, international non-governmental organizations have generally been scathing about the lack of freedom of speech and persistent human rights abuses by the new governments. In its 2019 annual report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the Egyptian "security forces have escalated a campaign of intimidation, violence, and arrests against political opponents, civil society activists, and many others who have simply voiced mild criticism of the government."[10] The case of Libya is even more dire: the country is facing a civil war and there are systematic abuses against migrants.

In Tunisia, HRW reported that the new government has made strides in improving freedom of speech and assembly. Despite the improvements, however, abuses still continue. Various forms of government censure are common. For example, a Tunisian parliamentary deputy was condemned by a military court for criticizing the army on Facebook.[11] In Gambia, the results thus far are arguably more encouraging. The new government has led many reforms to ensure the protection of human rights.[12] Moreover, the government also reacted swiftly to repression by the army of a demonstration against a sand-mining project which caused two deaths. It has announced that an investigation into the crackdown on the protest will be established.[13] For the cases of Burkina Faso and Mali, the situation is complicated by the need to address the rise of terrorism in these two countries. Amnesty International has criticized Burkina Faso for poor detention conditions, impunity, and the violation of women's and girls' rights,[14] though it added that the country has made slight progress on freedom of speech and freedom of association. The crisis in Mali is ongoing and Colonel Assimi Goïta, who led a coup on the back of the protests, has promised to organize a presidential election in February 2022.[15] He still enjoys the support of the "M5 movement," a coalition of several organizations including civil society and faith-based organizations.[16]

Limits and Risks of Street Protests as Peacebuilding

There is often an extremely porous or fine line between the will to preserve a process of pacification by the street and the instrumentalization of this process by the army or by partisan organizations. The recent case of Mali illustrates this fogginess. In a scabrous and tangled context including terrorist risks, foreign military presence, and schisms within the army, all democratic signals were in peril. The lively popular protests thus ignited the powder.

Nevertheless, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta has bowed out, less from the pressure of the people but more from the highly persuasive threat of soldiers determined to seize power. Two major risks stand out here. The first is that citizens' legitimate demands for better democratic conditions are diverted for the benefit of objectives which are themselves non-democratic. The appropriation of power by the military junta in Mali is clear testimony to this. The second risk is the perversion of democratic principles by an excessive use of street protests as a mechanism for destabilizing democratically elected regimes. The only legitimate and democratic place for popular protests should be that of a spontaneous outpouring against violations of the fundamental rights and freedoms of peoples.

Conclusion

The rise of contentious politics across the African continent has shown the power of the people, which can successfully challenge authoritarian regimes through protests. There is no doubt that, in Africa, protest has become a primary means of expressing the popular will and bringing about social change for peace and stability. However, protests that generate social movements need to be closely monitored, guided, and oriented toward the consolidation of peace. Scholars, policymakers, and the entire peacebuilding community should pay, therefore, more attention to street protests and to the activists who have the potential to turn these protests into a peacebuilding process. Indeed, street peacebuilding is a mass movement; but it needs elite support from politicians, policymakers, and scholars, to structure it toward peace consolidation in the long run.

Policy Options and Recommendations

The following policy options and recommendations are offered as lessons learned and best practices:

1. For Street Peacebuilders:

a. Street peacebuilders should frame a message that is not only clear but also specific to different relevant stakeholders such as the state, civil society organizations, foreign states, or international organizations. A clear expression of the political will and the desired social change is necessary for protest movements to successfully bring about sustainable and peaceful social change. A confusing or false message undermines the effectiveness of any peacebuilding through protest movements.

b. Street peacebuilders should strive to build an effective network of collaborations with relevant actors striving for the same objective. The more elite supporters and organizations that can be appropriated into the cause and the street movement's message, the more effective the protest movement will be in maintaining pressure on regimes over the short, medium, and long term.

2. For Policymakers and Scholars Involved in Peacebuilding Activities:

a. Since protest movements are driving forces for social change, it is important for policymakers and scholars to identify and assist leaders at any stage of a protest to help them better assess the situation and the conditions under which the protest can entrench peace in a sustainable way.

b. Scholars and policymakers should pay more attention to the nexus between social media and the street as a locus for peacebuilding. While authoritarian regimes strive to close streets and civic spaces, an increasing number of educated young people are taking back the street by mobilizing through social media, which has become a place of engagement with the state for the improvement of living conditions. More is yet to be learnt about this nexus between social media and the street as a new locus for peacebuilding.

3. For the International Community and Multilateral Organizations:

a. The international community and several international organizations have supported secret, "behind closed doors" mediation in situations of conflict and popular unrest. Now, with the rise of protests and mass movements, it is time to train mediators of peace for street protests. This can be achieved by supporting training programs for activists that might find themselves one day leading a mass protest movement. From this perspective, training leaders of civil society organizations for peacebuilding in civic spaces is critical.

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The 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award Competition

To mark the SVNP's 10th anniversary and as part of its mission to strengthen collaboration among members and share African knowledge about peacebuilding and state-building, SVNP established a competition for co-authored research papers analyzing key existing or emerging issues in peacebuilding in Africa, highlighting issues and lessons learned, and offering concrete actions that African and international policymakers can take to advance peacebuilding on the continent. This publication and the paper "#EndSARS Youth Protests in Nigeria: Lessons and Opportunities for Regional Stability" by Mr. Osei Baffour Frimpong and Mr. Richmond Commodore, were declared co-winners of the 2021 SVNP Joint Research Award.

The SVNP papers are available to download online on the Wilson Center Africa Program's website: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/africa-program

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