

## Book review

# *Africa uprising: Popular protest and political change*

Branch, Adam and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015

*Best Red, Cape Town, 251 pp.*

*ISBN (soft cover): 978-1-928246-05-3*

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This is arguably one of the most penetrating and insightful books on the variety of protests that have engulfed a number of African countries in recent times. It is my interpretation, that among other things, this book sets out to provide answers to some of the following simple but vexing questions. What are the drivers of the recent protests in Africa, and what is their nature? To what extent are these protests providing a meaningful account of socio-economic and political challenges faced by ordinary peoples in the continent? Who and what are behind these protests? And what meaningful political changes, if any, have they brought, subsequent to their ‘uprising’? In instances where some of the protests appear to have not brought about any meaningful changes or substantive reforms, what are the reasons that account for such limited outcomes?

The book is significant in more than one respect. It attempts to shift the geography of reason by looking at the question under examination from an African standpoint, rather than submerging it under a ‘universal narrative’ (p. 205). This is done by locating the recent wave of protests, and analysing them, as the authors argue, through looking ‘inward to Africa’s own past and its own history of protest before looking outward to events in the rest of the world...’ (p. 3).

Approaching the issue of protests inwardly is reflected in how the book is structured. Chapters one to three set out to provide two things. Firstly, a theoretical lens through which to analyse the recent protests in Africa. This is done by, on the one hand, giving an account of the different political and conceptual positions adopted by Nkwame Nkrumah with his approach to protest action as a form of change by rallying organs of civil society; and, on the other hand, reflecting upon Franz Fanon’s belief that out of necessity, political change can be advanced concretely by going beyond civil society, and rallying what is defined in the book as political society. Secondly, this theoretical lens is followed by a very enriching historical account of what the authors frame as three different periods (‘waves’) of protests in Africa: the anti-colonial protests of the 1940s; the ‘anti-austerity’ protests of the 1980s that began in Benin; and the third wave which they periodically locate as starting around 2000 (p. 67).

The subsequent chapters, five to seven, then zero-in on four different case studies falling within what the authors frame as the third wave of protests, namely, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan. In these four case studies, among other things, the common thread that runs through the analysis, and indeed the very subject of the book, is the way in which these protests emerged, the issues raised by those at the forefront, and the way in which they all ended without seemingly achieving any of the decisive changes for which they were initiated. In essence, and this is the currency of the book, it leaves the reader with several questions, such as whether protest actions in these four countries were a failure or not, and whether they succeeded to lay foundations for some other action in the future. Among key issues that the book exposes are the limitations to the twin promises that ‘multiparty’

democracy and a 'liberal agenda' would strongly contribute to more secure, stable, and prosperous nations and states.

While any reader may assume that the book only provides a wealth of information about protests in terms of the mentioned case studies, it is enriching to realise that even in the earlier theoretical and historical sections, there is enough information about specific moments of change or protests in countries like Ghana, Benin, Niger, and Zaire. Additionally, in the context of what is a very eloquent exposé of the limits of the 1990s multiparty democracy promise, the book describes how different organs of power outside of the state continue to see and consider a need for reforms and changes across different countries in Africa.

In all the cases studies analysed in the book, there is a further message that the authors drive home which relates to the challenges of building and maintaining cooperation between civil society and political society. They assign the lack of such allied activity to the absence of 'accessible unifying political ideologies' and of 'clearly viable alternatives to the dominant political order'.

Among other things, one of the significant arguments made in the book is locating what has become popularly known as the Arab Spring within the continent's (especially Sub-Saharan Africa's) historical and contemporary developments at large, as opposed to the dominant narrative and analysis that divorced these occurrences from Africa south of the Sahara, and compare and link them to other protests elsewhere in the world. This is quite significant because among other things it leads the book to insist upon African agency, in matters that have the possibility of creating political changes on the continent.

Lastly, the book is particularly significant in that it sounds an important caution against what appears to be an overextended focus on a narrative that speaks of an 'Africa Rising'. This is a narrative which 'champions the professional, globalized middle class as leading Africa's transition towards deepened democracy' (p. 202). Unfortunately, and as the book correctly implies, such an overextended focus on this 'Africa Rising' narrative results in a situation in which the ongoing struggles of the vast majority

of Africans, who remain politically oppressed, culturally undermined and economically exploited, are excluded from the narratives and analysis of the contemporary trajectory of Africa's development. The book is a worthwhile and very informative read for anyone who has an interest in having an enriched conceptual and political understanding of the dilemmas of protest action in Africa, especially as they relate to the continent's recent past.