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New kids on the block

How young Africans are fighting political cronyism

Next Tuesday Kenya will hold elections – rather a lot of them, actually, with six separate ballots including for the country's president and parliament. As this Kenyan "Super Tuesday" draws close, so too does widespread fear of ensuing riots with high body counts. In the wake of the 2007 elections, a dispute over the results snowballed into ethnically-charged outbreaks of violence which claimed the lives of more than 1000 people and left hundreds of thousands displaced.

This election, votes will again be cast along ethnic lines. The top two presidential candidates are old faces from different sections of the population: the incumbent, President Uhuru Kenyatta, is of Kikuyu ethnicity; the leader of the opposition Raila Odinga, is Luo. Both men have accused each other of trying to manipulate the final outcome. Whilst Kenya is – in economic terms – the motor of East Africa and its capital Nairobi a connected global metropolis, its ethnic groups are starkly divided.

There is still hope. Young Kenyans are increasingly weary of the old patterns of politics. They live in a global world and do not want their identity boiled down to an ethnic group. Political activist Boniface Mwangi, 34, is a good example of what this change means. Mwangi is standing as an independent in the parliamentary election. He has crowdfunded his campaign and built up support through social media, avoiding the established Kikuyu power structures. Though unlikely to win a parliamentary seat, his candidacy is an important symbol, showing young people they can enter the political arena without the relevant family ties.

Africans Rising

Beyond Kenya, the Africans Rising movement is seeking to engage young people from 44 African countries to lobby for peace, justice and prosperity across the continent. Speaking to The Guardian, the movement's co-founder Kumi Naidoo said: "History is not to blame for the human rights violations happening right now... These wrongs are

current and Africans Rising is about calling out our leaders on these failures and building a better, more just, more peaceful and sustainable Africa".

The slogan "Africa rising" was coined in 2011 in an Economist report about Africa's strong economic growth. It struck a chord and soon business consultancies such as the US firm Deloitte were using it as they waxed lyrical about the supposedly "unstoppable rise of the African middle class". It wasn't all hot air: the gross national product of many African countries has risen rapidly in recent years, with some economies posting two-digit annual growth. At the same time, millions of Africans are sinking deeper into poverty as the same old leaders refuse to share their country's wealth beyond their circle of cronies.

Lucha

The DRC's Lucha movement – an abbreviation of lutte pour le changement or "fight for change" – likewise represents youngsters unwilling to accept the status quo. Starting as an informal collective of recent graduates one of its first campaigns was for clean water in the country's eastern metropolis Goma in 2012. With a population of more than one million, the capital of the North Kivu province (a region rich in raw materials) borders the Kivu lake. Yet only the wealthiest residents have running water; everyone else has to buy drinking water from merchants' tankers or fetch it from the lake themselves. Further inland, clean drinking water is even harder to come by.

Since its launch five years ago, Lucha has also been campaigning for better roads, free primary education for all (as guaranteed in the country's constitution) and a range of other social rights. Jobs, too, are an issue as even young people with good qualifications have trouble finding proper employment.

Since last year, however, the movement's focus has been on President Joseph Kabila who has clung to power beyond his presidential term limit, which expired in December 2016, leading to a spiral of violence.

The government is cracking down hard on Lucha activists who often languish for months in overcrowded jails on the most spurious of charges. Many are still at university, and risk leaving with no qualifications (a spell in prison is hardly conducive to study). Those already working stand to lose their positions or clients.

Yet Lucha's members do not give up. They see themselves as continuing the tradition of the African independence movements and the

charismatic founders of the continent's states. Unlike previous generations though, this new grouping is non-violent by principle and its members are not aiming for political office or for government roles. They merely want to enjoy their rights as citizens.

Y'en a marre!

In Senegal, the Y'en a marre! movement – "We've had enough!" – saw rappers and journalists team up in 2011 to demand a reliable electricity supply. The movement soon moved on to tackling the incumbent president, Abdoulaye Wade, who was manoeuvring to stay on for a third term. Y'en a marre called the country's citizens to demonstrate, to register to vote, and to make use of their citizens' rights. In the end 600,000 new voters registered and Abdoulaye Wade suffered an unexpected defeat at the ballot box at the hands of Macky Sall. Unfortunately, on election Sall dropped his pledge to reduce presidential terms from seven years to five.

Across the continent, young Africans are using social media to create new political movements, challenging the old power structures. They share the conviction that their continent is a land of opportunity – but one that needs a new political climate to flourish.



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