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Close to bloom

Across Africa, youth-led protests are calling for change. Is this the start of an African Spring?

People are taking to the streets in Africa. Following a wave of protests and an election, a millennial president has come to power in Senegal, who just a few weeks earlier was a political prisoner. In Kenya, street protests led by Gen Z students saw the cabinet dismissed and tax increases rejected. While Nigeria and Uganda have also witnessed demonstrations, accompanied by a huge security presence, the government in Zimbabwe has ordered the preventive arrest and detention of prominent civil society representatives. Different governments seem to be getting worried.

From Sudan to South Africa, repeated protests have been seen across the continent over the last few years. But Africans taking to the streets seems to be an increasingly frequent occurrence. Although classifying the protests as a Gen Z phenomenon conceals a great many differences, on a continent where the average age of political leaders is over 60 and that of the people they are governing is under 19, it is no coincidence that the protestors are identifying as Gen Z. The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows growing frustration among young people. Although two thirds of Africans see democracy as the only legitimate form of government, party loyalty and voter turnout is on the decline among the younger generation. As political leaders are not held accountable by democratic means, radical alternatives have become more popular. Support for military intervention in cases of abuse of power has increased across Africa, and this too is particularly pronounced among young people. Democracy is still the ambition and coups are seen by many as potential attempts to save dysfunctional democracies.

That said, 2024 is probably not going to be a year of coups in Africa, at least compared with 2023. So far, it is proving to be a year of protest and elections. This is good news. It is difficult to predict when the next demonstrations will take place, but young people in Nigeria and Uganda are inspired by the success of the protests in Senegal and Kenya, just as the student protests in Bangladesh are admired by some in Zimbabwean civil society. To speak of an ‘African Spring’, however, would be somewhat premature at this stage, not least because the most recent

protests have tended to take place in countries which have comparatively free elections, such as Kenya and Nigeria. Thus – as we have seen in Senegal – change remains also possible through the ballot box. But there is still a good chance that the current protests in different African countries will spread.

Deteriorating conditions

The main catalyst for the demonstrations has been the denial of social inclusion. Many young people have no more faith that the political leaders who are currently in office can and will change this. Every year, up to 12 million Africans enter a labour market with only three million available jobs. The majority end up eking out a miserable living in what is known as the 'informal sector'. Debt crises and inflation in the wake of the pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and sudden Western interest rate hikes have meant a new round of fiscal austerity in Africa, with the majority not even benefitting from the projects financed by these debts. Finding a job is more difficult than ever.

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More than 20 countries on the African continent are facing a debt crisis. Several governments thus urgently need the International Monetary Fund (IMF), not least because Chinese loans to African countries have been on the decline since 2016 and the interest rates on government bonds – so called Eurobonds – in Western currencies are too high. The IMF grants emergency assistance but there are conditions attached. Typically, the IMF requires higher tax revenues, for instance. But because there are not enough formal jobs to be taxed, the only option debt distressed governments have is to tax their own privileges or the daily consumption of people and cut subsidies for everyday goods to service the debt. These regressive measures, which hit lower income groups particularly hard, is something the Kenyan government recently decided to implement. Nigeria's government has done so as well. And it was exactly these new regressive taxes that ultimately sparked the most recent protests. These protests, however, build on a whole gamut of structural issues causing discontent.

For example, public services in Africa's growing cities are often in a worse state today than before the pandemic. Inflation, which was already high, is now almost 40 per cent in Nigeria. Now more taxes are to be added. This is seen as an attack, by means of economic policy, on people's everyday life and ultimately on the future prospects of an entire generation. As a result of rapid urbanisation, many are now living side by side – or TikTok by X account – in the continent's urban informal settlements. They see that others are in the same situation. There are too many of them to be appeased with electoral promises and small gifts.

Democratisation and the 'end of history'

However, the protests also reveal a more fundamental failure of 40 years of supply-side economics, in other words the attempt to foster economic growth and create jobs by improving the business environment. This is something for which the West shoulders a significant share of the blame. After the Cold War, many African countries democratised. However, they did so during another period of debt crises which had been advancing across the continent since the 1980s. These debt crises were also triggered or accelerated by interest rate hikes in the West, and the response back then – on the recommendation of the IMF, in which Western states occupy a particularly powerful position – was austerity. In many parts of Africa, the 'end of history' thus began with democratisation, but with conditions which meant a deregulation of the economy, a reduction in social security and fewer job opportunities. In other words, political inclusion came alongside social exclusion.

Even after this, problems on the supply side were blamed for continuing economic problems in Africa. In the 1990s, many Western 'donor countries', the World Bank and the IMF saw trade liberalisation, good governance and subsequently vocational training as further crucial levers for economic recovery. Cooperation and financial incentives were geared towards this. The idea was that if only African countries could 'offer' freer markets, good governance and a well-trained workforce, things would improve. The missing 'development' was thus primarily understood and treated as being down to an inadequate supply of know-how (lever: support for vocational training from the West), a lack of morals or efficiency among those in power (lever: good governance advice from the West) and a lack of foreign capital (lever: dismantle trade barriers and provide incentives for foreign direct investment from the West). But none of this has really worked. The per capita income for the whole continent has only grown by one per cent since 1990. Some of the long-acclaimed champions of good governance have since become autocracies destabilising entire regions. And in the current high-interest

rate phase in the US and Europe, hardly any capital is going to Africa from the West any more, if anything it is moving in the other direction.

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At least there is one positive achievement though: since 2000, the share of Africans with a university degree has doubled. The problem is that only very few of them can find a decent job. Now, they are protesting against governments that are especially close Western partners, such as in Kenya and Nigeria. For some observers, it is surprising that the protestors in Kenya are focusing on new IMF loans rather than the bilateral debt owed to China. But this is less surprising if we look at the results of survey data: the People's Republic of China is more popular in Africa than European countries and it is not held responsible for the IMF's requirements of today and in the past. Instead, many Africans rather admire China and Brazil for their economic success, driven by strategic market protection or certain social policies that have effectively stimulated demand. Both countries had success in fighting poverty and tend to reject economic advice from the West.

The good news is that the children whose parents experienced the political liberalisation and simultaneous hardships of the 1980s and 1990s are seeking out democratic ways of expressing their dissatisfaction. Indeed, the protesters explicitly invoke democratic constitutions or unfulfilled election promises where they exist. They want democratic accountability. A Chinese one-party state is not a model they aspire to. Nor are they fans of Russia. That said, they have lost faith that the current generation of politicians, who are jointly responsible for the supply-side economics coordinated with the West, could still drive change and achieve the economic and social integration of an increasingly frustrated Gen Z. In many of the continent's political economies, economic redistribution or taxation of financial outflows into tax havens, as proposed by trade unions and civil society, would likely result in the breakdown of existing government alliances. This money is too often the corruption-prone glue that holds them together. This is also where the ultimate demand for a leader's resignation à la Kenya's *#RutoMustGo* comes from.

The urgent task of the G7 and the EU is to provide a

So, what can Europa do now? Even if Europe's interests are currently closely linked to some of

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the governments under pressure, offering honest dialogue with the protestors wherever possible would be a good move, not least because some of them might assume political responsibility in the foreseeable future (see the case of Senegal). And it is this that some participants in African protest movements fiercely demanded during a visit to Berlin. The even more urgent task of the G7 and the EU is however to provide a more fundamental response to the failure of 40 years of supply-side economics in Africa. This would mean extending the path already taken in German development policy towards a common global structural policy to the rest of Europe and to meet the desire for economic sovereignty. To achieve this, more rapid reform of the international debt management system is required. If Europe wants to win trust and partners in Africa, more projects to stimulate economic demand are of the essence. This is about no less than a paradigm shift in European (development) cooperation with Africa: from supporting an expansion of the processing sector and the provision of decent local jobs to a socially just energy transition and the development of an African free trade zone that can strategically protect and build its markets. If Europe wants to make the much-vaunted 'better offer' in a multipolar world, it must prioritise strengthening demand.



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