

“No matter how long the winter, spring is sure to follow”*

The Arab Spring and its effect in Sub-Saharan Africa



*Guinean Proverb

In the spring of 2011, dramatic political changes and events took place in the Arab World. The Arab Spring was comprised of popular uprisings and civil unrest across the Arab world. However, during the same period there was also a high level of civil unrest and several demonstrations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Was there a “Spring” in Sub-Saharan Africa as well? There were political events inspired by and similar to the Arab Spring. Yet, the most striking link between the events in the Arab world and Sub-Saharan Africa seems to be the heavy-handed and fear-driven reactions of governments to peaceful demonstrations. This brief provides an overview of political developments in Sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring, and a detailed analysis of political events in Malawi, showing how the government’s fearful response to peaceful demonstrations sparked civil unrest.

The Arab Spring

On the 17th of December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself in petrol and set himself on fire outside the governor’s office in a small town in Tunisia. His protest against the inhumane treatment he had received at the hands of Tunisian state officials resonated with a disillusioned people and sparked the Jasmine Revolution. The authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted, and the Jasmine Revolution set off

the Arab Spring - which has become the name of the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world in the spring of 2011. Popular uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other Arab countries forced regimes that have ruled for decades without showing any inclination towards democracy, to make concessions or to resign. These societies had been plagued by economic inequality, political disenfranchisement and bleak future

prospects for large segments of society. Rising costs of living and especially rising food prices mobilised and united people in such high numbers that their mass protests could not be ignored or dismissed by authoritarian machineries. The Arab Spring has led to remarkable political change. In Tunisia and Egypt, long-serving dictators and their regimes have been overthrown. In Yemen, President Saleh was injured and fled to Saudi Arabia. In Jordan, King Abdullah II dismissed his cabinet and implemented changes. In Algeria, a 19-year-old state of emergency has been lifted. In Libya, protests turned into a fully fledged civil war with NATO engagement. In Syria and Bahrain, the regimes responded with brutal means towards its citizens.

Box 1: Social media and the Arab Spring

Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain highlighted the importance of social media during the Arab Spring in an article in *Journal of Democracy*: "There are many ways to tell the story of political change. But one of the most consistent narratives from civil society leaders in Arab countries has been that the Internet, mobile phones, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter made the difference this time... Thanks to these technologies, virtual networks materialized in the streets."

The Facebook-page "We are all Khalid Said" is a case in point. Originally founded by the Egyptian Google-employee Wael Ghonim, the page was established in memory of Khalid Said, a 26-year old Egyptian who died while in the custody of Egyptian police. The group was an important news-outlet during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. By August that year 1,6 million people were following the Arabic page, while the English version gave over 140 000 people news about revolutionary activities during the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring and the regime turnovers also resonated with people further south. Today there are similarities - but there are also stark differences - between the situation north and south of the Sahara. Many Sub-Saharan African countries have not reached the urbanisation and educational level of their neighbours in the north. Access to internet and social media usage is not at the same level as in many Arab countries, where internet and the social media played a crucial role in organising the civil unrest (see Box 1). Since the early 1990s Sub-Saharan African countries have conducted multiparty elections to a larger extent than in the Arab states in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Yet in some cases, authoritarian regimes continue to hold on to their power, using elections in order to continue or strengthen their rule (see CMI Brief *When Elections Consolidate Power*). The Arab Spring brought renewed hopes to people in many Sub-Saharan African countries who found themselves in similar situations; politically disenfranchised (either formally or through unfair elections) with minimal hope for a better economic future, and with rising food and fuel prices. The Arab Spring also brought

fear to authoritarian regimes, leading them to fasten their grips and respond to people's protests with iron fists. The question is then: can political developments in Sub Sahara Africa in the first half of 2011 be interpreted as spillover-effects from the Arab Spring?

The "macro" perspective: Protests across Sub-Saharan Africa

There seems to have been strong inspirational and rhetorical links. The Arab Spring inspired and evoked a strong resonance among disillusioned citizens also further south on the continent. There were protests and demonstrations against rising costs and worsening living conditions as well as authoritarian regimes across Sub-Saharan Africa - from Mauritania in the North-West, to Sudan in the North-East, all the way to South-Africa in the South - totaling 26 countries. All these protests received international media attention. It is not possible to link all these protests to the Arab Spring (see Box 2). The protests in Côte D'Ivoire against Laurent Gbagbo who refused to stand down after losing the 2010 Presidential election, started before the events in Northern Africa. The protests against election processes in Nigeria, Benin, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo might have been nominally inspired by the Arab Spring events, but election processes in Central Africa tend to create protests and demonstrations. However, in many other cases in Sub-Saharan Africa the Arab Spring has been mentioned as a source of inspiration for protesters. In the immediate aftermath of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, there was a sharp rise in the number of protests organized by civil society, student organizations and the opposition. In February and March, an analysis of media reports indicate that 20 Sub-Saharan African countries experienced some sort of civil unrest organized by social forces in manners inspired by the Arab Spring. The rhetorical and inspirational link faded as time went by, but protesters in Malawi, Senegal and Togo in June and July explicitly referred to the "Arab Spring" as one of their sources of inspiration. In countries like Mauritania and Angola, social media was used to organize and mobilize people to join demonstrations and protests.

The most important link to the Arab Spring can be seen in the authorities' reactions to threats of- and actual demonstrations and protests across Sub-Saharan Africa. Except for the regimes in Sierra Leone and Kenya who met calls for action against inflation and rising food and fuel costs with political dialogue, most regimes met even feeble signs of civil unrest with severe repression, arrests, beatings and even killings. In Angola and Zimbabwe, the organizers of the demonstrations were arrested and the protests quashed before they were even held. In Burkina Faso, Uganda, Malawi, Senegal, Mauritania, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Togo and Swaziland, the police, army and other security agencies responded to demonstrations with brutal force, killing and arresting protesters.

Several regimes made it illegal for domestic media and academics to cover the Arab Spring events. In Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea the state owned media were instructed not to report on the topic, and people were arrested for even debating the issue. In Malawi and Gabon, academic freedom was curtailed. Scholars and academics were fired for talking about the issues in Northern Africa, and for suggesting that governments are at least partly responsible for failing policies.

Thus there seems to have been an indirect but powerful spillover-effect, both in terms of fear of protests (as illustrated by the actions of many regimes and their subsequent harsh suppression of protests), as well as the inspirational and rhetorical references of those who protested. In addition, there were also similarities in the reasons behind and motivations to protest, as well as direct links between demonstrations in the Arab world and the economic consequences for Sub-Saharan Africa. The insecurity and low predictability that the Arab Spring created was part of the reason why the spring of 2011 saw a sharp rise in prices of essential goods, especially so for fuel. Many of the popular uprisings were sparked by inflation, especially rising prices on food and fuel, which intensified popular discontent with the ruling regimes. However, it is difficult to identify direct links between the Arab Spring and political unrest in Sub-Saharan Africa. The events that have unfolded in Malawi in 2011 may serve to illustrate the complexity of spillover effects.

Fearing an Arab Spring: How Mutharika's fear of a revolution might have made it increasingly possible

After the electoral victory of President Bingu wa Mutharika in the 2009 presidential election in Malawi, many Malawians thought they had crossed an important threshold. The President was elected by the majority of the population and the voters' choice appeared to cross religious and ethnic lines. However, many domestic and international observers linked Mutharika's ability to overcome the ethno-regional voting patterns and win 66 percent of the vote to the incumbent's use of political patronage, in particular the agricultural subsidy programme largely financed by foreign aid. After the 2009 elections Malawi has experienced both an economic and democratic backslide.

In 2011 there have been large-scale demonstrations and civil unrest on a scale not experienced in Malawi since Life President Hastings Kamuzu Banda lost the election in 1994. As of February this year, a series of decisions by the incumbent have affected civil liberties negatively. Tensions escalated in July when Mutharika proceeded to sign into law the Civil Procedures Bill Number 27, which is popularly known as the "Injunctions Law." Originally tabled in Parliament in January 2011, this legislation prevents any postponement

Box 2: Protests and demonstrations in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2011



White = No large scale protests reported

Green = Large scale protests planned and reported, no link to Arab Spring and/or rising fuel and food prices

Yellow = Large scale protests planned and reported, links to "Arab Spring" and/or rising fuel and food prices

Red = Large scale protests planned and reported, links to Arab Spring or rising fuel and food prices, and government crackdown

of government decisions caused by a judicial review. This was a serious blow to maintaining public accountability, since such judicial reviews had prevented the Government from revoking the license of an independent radio station and from firing the lecturer at Chancellor College. In essence, the law prevents the courts from intervening in legislation that could be harmful to the opposition. On the 20th of July, thousands of protesters gathered in the streets of Lilongwe and other cities and towns in Malawi. The immediate concerns raised were linked to the rising fuel prices and a lack of foreign exchange. Fundamentally, however, these protests were linked to a series of anti-democratic policies that President Mutharika and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government had implemented.

These reforms repealed or restricted many of the fundamental democratic rights enshrined in the country's constitution. A presidential directive had been released requiring all who wished to host a demonstration to deposit at least two million Kwachas (approximately 13,000 USD) beforehand. The Police Act was amended, making it illegal to assemble or demonstrate outside the State House, the National Assembly or the Courts without authority. People were banned from walking together in groups of two or more, as it was seen as the potential beginnings of a demonstration. Searches without warrants were also legalized. Local courts were reintroduced for the first time since 1994, and both journalists and opposition politicians could be tried there. The Government threatened to ban all critical Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Section 46 of the penal code was amended in order to empower the Minister of Information to prohibit and punish any publication that was seen as being contrary to the public interest. Then the above-mentioned "Injunctions Law" was introduced. The government clearly tried to establish a situation of social control rather than inclusive government.

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The protests in Malawi can be seen as a reaction against political disenfranchisement and socio-economic issues, much in the same way as in the Arab Spring. Many of the policies and decrees implemented by the Mutharika government seemed to have been passed to avoid a similar situation to that of Tunisia or Egypt. The presidential decree requiring 2 million Kwachas to be paid in order to hold demonstrations was delivered on the 6th of March, just as signs started to show that the Arab Spring might spill over into Sub-Saharan African countries. Curtailing academic freedom must also be seen in the light of these events. Acts of prevention seemed to become acts of ignition instead.

The reaction from the government towards the protests on the 20th of July was also hostile. At the end of the day, 18 people were killed, and numerous others were injured. Interestingly, it was the police that cracked down on protesters, and not the army. This could point to there being disunity within the governing regime. The government also banned media coverage of the demonstrations, though this was not successfully implemented. And even though President Mutharika both threatened and pleaded with CSOs and the opposition not to host any more demonstrations, it is expected that Malawi will experience more civil unrest. On the 9th of August a list of 20 demands was published in the Nyasa Times online. The article warned that if the demands are not met, the President risks facing the "Red Army" in the not-so-distant future.

Conclusion: Different, Yet Similar

The protests and other events that transpired around the 20th of July have been called "Malawi's Arab Spring" by various news agencies, both local and international. When comparing the underlying social factors, it is possible to argue that many of the same grievances are present in Northern Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Malawi and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

What seems to be clear, however, is that the way in which regimes react to civil unrest, demonstrations and protests have changed after the Arab Spring. Governments seem to fear demonstrations and protests to a disproportionate degree, and there genuinely seems to be less room for criticizing regimes. As the situation in Malawi highlights, these

disproportionate reactions might actually help fan the flame of civil unrest, rather than act as the precautionary measures that the rulers mean them to be. A pressing question is how President Mutharika and other authoritarian rulers in Sub Sahara Africa will react in the face of future protests that are likely to occur. Will they engage in meaningful dialogue, or will they continue to rely on heavy-handed repression? One of the most insightful comments on the relationship between the Arab events and Sub-Saharan Africa was provided by John Githongo who resigned as head of Kenya's anti-corruption drive in 2005, protesting President Kibaki's lack of commitment to the programme. He subsequently went into exile, but has now returned to Kenya. Githongo wrote: "The supreme irony of the Arab Spring is that the leaders of Kenya, Uganda, Malawi and other countries have, in their alarmed reaction to events in North Africa, helped bring the revolution south, at least as an idea ... For now, their demonstrations have been easily dispersed. But if their complaints merge with long-festering ethnic and regional grievances, that could lead to a far more volatile uprising" (New York Times 23 July 2011).

This brief is based on media analysis of international and local media reports on protests and demonstrations in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2011. The section on Malawi is broadly based on the paper [Beyond the Historic Landslide Victories: A Critical Review of the Post May 19 2009 Politics in Malawi](#) by Blessings Chinsinga from the University of Malawi.

The paper was presented at the conference "Legitimacy of Power - Possibilities of Opposition" held in Jinja, Uganda from the 30th of May 2011 until the 1st of June 2011. The conference is part of the ongoing CMI project "Elections and Democracy in Africa".