

Is the North African-Type Revolution Inevitable in the Rest of Africa?

by Tesfaye Habisso, March 21, 2011

The answer to the above question depends on whom you ask. If you ask the youths of Africa or any other region in the world today, the answer would be a resounding "yes!" Thanks to the unhindered flow of global information via the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, etc. the youths of today, who presently constitute not less than 60 percent of the populations of many countries, are well informed about current events of great magnitude such as political revolutions unfolding throughout the world and their fervour for change has risen beyond our expectations. For them, global revolution is in the air. On the contrary, if you ask the long-enthroned rulers and patriarchs of Africa or other leaders anywhere in the non-democratic world or citizens of functioning democracies, the answer would undoubtedly be in the negative for the obvious but different reasons. Whatever the case, it is quite untenable to compare the political, historical and cultural context of North Africa with sub-Saharan Africa and also to put the countries of the region in one basket and predict that the 'revolution virus' will attack one country after another, in a sort of domino effect.

Be this as it may, the Encyclopaedia of Revolutions and Revolutionaries chronicles more than a thousand cases of internally driven regime change from the ancient world to the present. Some were peaceful, with regimes dissolving without a trace. Others were not peaceful at all. Many ended in greater liberty, while some ended in terrible tyrannies. The difference, in case after case, is the intellectual climate that surrounded the great event [C. H. Rockwell: 2003]. Today, North African and Middle Eastern Arab countries are experiencing, one after another, internally driven regime change and the contagion is expected to spread quickly to the rest of Africa and elsewhere. Those autocratic and un-elected life-presidents of North Africa and the broader Middle East who were for long propped up by the West (except perhaps Brother Gaddafi of Libya) and who have had exercised their sway unconstrained, without compromises and concessions, and who were not willing to share their authority and fortunes except with their family members

and cronies, are now facing the fury of their masses and most of them finding themselves on the verge of eviction and dishonourable exit from power or even their earthly life. The specter of political revolution toward 'regime change' is taken by some circles to pose a looming threat to the political elites of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, and the non-democratic countries of the globe in general, today.

Yes, revolution is in the air and gradually gaining momentum. Like an ineluctable and irresistible airborne-virus, which infects anyone with whom it makes contact, the revolution bug seems to have bitten us all. Whether on the street or online, it seems people have little else to enthuse about. And Africans are no different. And all this, because of the events in North Africa and the Arab world in the last three months. From one part of the Arab world to the other, street protests have become de rigueur. The list seems endless: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Iran, Bahrain, Syria, the Gulf Emirates, Kingdom of Jordan, etc. In all these places, Arab citizens, having tired of the rule of un-elected and unaccountable despots, have taken to the streets to forcefully eject their oppressors. While the situation is still fluid in many of these countries, street protests have already seen off dictators in two countries, Tunisia and Egypt. In a third, Libya, a virtual "civil war", as some call it or the supreme ruler and his forces undertaking a ruthless campaign of massacring those Libyan masses opposed to his brutal regime as others argue, is in full swing and many thousands of innocent civilians have lost their lives. The 'killing fields' are still active and there seems no end in sight for the carnage. And the international coalition hurriedly formed by the US, NATO bloc and some Arab countries, thanks to the UNSC's decision 1973 passed recently, is now raining cruise missiles and deadly weapons against Gaddafi's forces in Libya under the guise of humanitarian intervention, to save the indiscriminate massacre of civilians by their own rogue regime and brutal leader. What the outcome will tantamount to, only time will tell.

Generally speaking, however, young Africans in the urban centres and institutions of higher learning, just like the Arab youths of North Africa and the

Middle East, who have been glued to their Internet, Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, Websites, Television sets or Laptops, like people everywhere, as these events have unfolded, are wondering if a similar revolution could happen in sub-Saharan Africa, too. Naturally. For a great majority of Africans, especially the urban populations, are utterly dissatisfied with the current state of their countries: bad governance, non-respect of human and democratic rights, suppression of dissent and free press, narrow political space for opposition parties and all voices of dissent, rampant corruption, massive unemployment, intolerably high costs of living, very low incomes, heavy-handed approach of urban administrations toward the public, such as demolitions of shanty quarters and dwelling houses in the name of urban development but without any consent of the occupiers or the owners, etc. Yes, today, many sections of African populations are completely disgruntled and disenchanted with the ruling political classes in sub-Saharan Africa. The feeling here is that something has to be done. People are absolutely dissatisfied with the periodic elections and wonder when it would be their turn to cast off their oppressors. Today, everybody is talking about revolution. So topical has revolution become, that one topmost leader or lawmaker after another, from West Africa to the Horn of Africa, has found it necessary to reassure every visiting foreign delegation of the donor community (development partners), that the sort of regime-change that took place in Tunisia and Egypt, could not happen here. According to our leaders, this is because of the supposed legitimacy that the latter enjoy and claim to have gained from free, fair and credible periodic elections that take place every four or five years in Africa. In short, because of a well functioning and stable democracy in place. Therein lies the concern. Do all African countries really have functional democracies wherein the peoples can 'hire' or 'fire' or peacefully change their leaders on a constitutionally or legally agreed upon time frame and on a contractual basis, and where citizens are ensured a robust rule of law, a vibrant free press, protection of human and democratic rights, an independent and accessible judiciary? Do people in these countries feel free from state terror, from fear and anxiety and thus enjoy individual physical safety and security? Do these Africans have genuinely elected and capable leaders who are free from

corruption, discriminatory practices and other malpractices and who also are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the citizens? Sadly, there are presently a great majority of citizens whose responses to these questions would be in the negative in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is indeed sad that, this is the stark African reality today except for a few countries that can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

An objective analysis of the events in the Arab world (North Africa and the Middle East) shows, though there were social and economic factors involved, the main reason for the recourse to street protests as a means of changing the leadership, was because constitutional options were non-existent. All these Arab countries suffer from a lack of functional democracy and a two-to-three-decade-long emergency law imposed upon them by their unchallengeable and unaccountable leaders. As a result, street protests represent the only viable option for these nations, for effecting leadership change. Democracy provides a safety-valve, however fragile it may be in most sub-Saharan African countries, in that it provides citizens an opportunity to take or try to take revenge on their oppressors, through periodic elections. Thus, voting can be cathartic. It gives you the opportunity to express your support or disapproval of your leaders or their policies, allowing you to vent your frustrations about the direction of your country, and its leadership. If Arabs had real democracy, they would have been able to change their leaders, without all this blood-curdling catastrophe. And I am talking about real democracy here, where citizens' votes count; not sham-democracy, where votes are rigged, voters intimidated, and elections stolen in broad daylight.

Democracy developed as an alternative to absolutism. It empowers citizens by giving them the right to vote. Through the vote, citizens have the power to hire-and-fire their political leaders as they deem fit. Elections were devised as a tool for sharing and rotating power, among different political parties, thus ensuring peace within the realm. When elections are routinely stolen, they become a weapon for monopolizing and perpetuating state power and political

exclusion. This “weapon-isation” perverts the ideal of democracy, taking us back to the alternate model of government: absolutism. Make no mistake about it, the wounds inflicted on the body-polity by vote-stealing are so grievous, they hark back to the violence and banditry of feudalism. When citizens are disenfranchised and denied the ability to choose their leaders, through election rigging, the resulting conditions approximate the feudal state. History teaches us that the only way to change the leadership in a feudal polity is through violence and bloodshed. You will recall the Russian and French revolutions where citizens rose up, and in an orgy of blood-letting, extirpated the members of the aristocracy. Denied constitutional means of change, the citizens of the Arab world had no choice but to confront tyranny with the only option available to them: REVOLUTION. The question for our esteemed lawmakers and rulers in the sub-Saharan region is this: Do our peoples in Africa today enjoy real, “functional democracy?”. Can they really claim that votes count, that voters' wishes are respected, people's needs and aspirations fulfilled and their safety and security protected? This question is very important because, while their views that the Tunisian/Egyptian model cannot be reproduced here may be correct, their complacency, however, is worrying. Worrying because a worse scenario could be in store for sub-Saharan Africa: Libya!!!

Unlike heterogeneous Libyan tribal communities, disadvantaged also by regional differences and animosities, Tunisian and Egyptian societies are largely homogeneous and harmonious. Held together by common religion, common Arabic language and common ethnicity, these people could act in concert against a common foe. It was impossible to turn anyone tribe against the other, simply because they are largely one tribe. Contrast this with sub-Saharan Africa, inhabited by numerous and diverse ethnic groups, where only elites hailing from two or three and opposed ethnic groups dominate the politics and economics of the country--political powers as well as public service posts. The leader would have been able to count on the automatic support of his “brothers”, regardless of the demerits of his cause. Any sustained protest against the president or prime minister would have been

dismissed as a witch-hunt by his people, and the country would be on the brink of civil war. Just like Libya. Just like most African countries, that is, except for Ethiopia and Liberia, Libya is a colonial joinery of three provinces following Italian victory in the Italo-Turkish war (1911-1912), Tripolitania in the northwest, Barka(Cyrenaiaca) in the east, and Fezzan in the southwest unit. Today, following the protests launched in February by ordinary Libyans, the country is in a virtual “civil war”, with the eastern part of the country under “rebel” control, while the rump Khaddafi government holds Tripoli and Sirt. Thousands of people have been killed. Unlike the Tunisians and Egyptians, Libyans are not one people, and so it has been possible to turn one tribe/province against the other. If sub-Saharan Africans were ever to attempt to forcibly change their leadership through popular street protests, the outcome is more likely to be the Libyan scenario, rather than that of Tunisia/Egypt. God forbid! The thought of the carnage going on in Libya now, should concentrate or prick our minds here. The ruling political classes must raise their game; they cannot continue to be so complacent. Governance must improve. Rampant political and economic corruption of appointees, elected officials and public employees that is often lamented by domestic as well as external watchdogs and aid agencies such as the World Bank and IMF should be systematically and effectively rooted out; there should be no condoning or complacency in this regard. Heavy-handed state measures against the interests and constitutional rights of the populations should be stopped once and for all. For instance, there should be no indiscriminate demolitions of urban houses and people's dwellings without the consent of the owners and the latter's timely payment of appropriate monetary and/or other additional compensations once they have agreed to the demolitions, as have not been happening in many African cities such as Addis Abeba, Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, Harare, etc. Make no mistake about it, this is the age of protest. Surely, democracy may not come through unconstitutional means and without the preconditions for it to take root are met, but popular uprisings are the result of utmost bitterness and frustrations and no power can effectively stop them, when people can no longer bear the yoke of oppression and brutal rule they stop fearing fear itself. Revolutions (not always

successful) have been an absolutely normal feature of world history over the last fifty years or so. When the masses rise up against oppression and injustice and take action together, they can successfully change the nature of the state or (occasionally) do away with the state altogether. Yes, make no mistake, even tacit veto of the populace and bureaucracy is enough to detrimentally weaken the regime in place and do away with the unjust status quo even if the outcome may not produce democracy worthy of the terminology. Soon or later, Africans will undoubtedly rise up against autocracy and injustice, as they have done it again and again throughout their history. Therefore, Africans should be allowed to freely and consciously choose and change their leaders on their will and whim, voice their grievances and demand their rights without any fear or docile submission. Henceforth, elections must be free, fair and credible and those institutions responsible for holding such elections should be impartial and of impeccable integrity and professionalism, starting with the next elections. This might be the only escape route for sub-Saharan African countries to avoid “Libya” in the future. Our reigning leaders and lawmakers should note that the road to “Libya” is paved with complacency. And this should be avoided at all costs if we want to avert spontaneous and blood-letting regime change by the angry masses.