

1 *Introduction: The Puzzle of Africa's Third Wave of Protests*

A cloud of acrid smoke wafted off the burning tire that blocked the road leading to Chancellor College in Zomba, Malawi on August 18, 2011. Student demonstrators, some brandishing mock weapons and wearing armor made from milk cartons, howled insults at the government of President Bingu wa Mutharika, which had closed the campus and frozen staff salaries in April after Professor Blessings Chinsinga delivered a lecture on the Arab Spring, purportedly inciting social unrest. Students described feeling caught in the middle of a standoff between the striking faculty and the authorities.¹ There was a sense that the president was paranoid to expect uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya to spark similar events in Malawi. Protesters said they hoped to restore academic freedom so they could return to class, not start a revolution.

It is easy to see why Mutharika hedged his bets. In 2011, as popular movements toppled autocratic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, the incidence of protests south of the Sahara was on a steep climb. The graph in Figure 1.1 plots the annual frequency of protests and riots² in sub-Saharan Africa from 1997 to 2016, the period for which data are available. Estimates are from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Raleigh et al., 2010), which is coded using reports from national and local media, humanitarian agencies, and research groups. Roughly 19,816 major protests erupted between 2011 and 2016, spanning the continent. This spike interrupted a flatlining in protest frequency from the late twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first. Political scientists declared a third wave of African protests – the first wave having led to decolonization in the 1960s and the second wave having ushered in democratic transitions in

¹ Interviews and direct observations of the protest.

² The difference between protests and riots is vague. “Riot” sometimes connotes a higher degree of violence or transgression (Murphy, 2011).

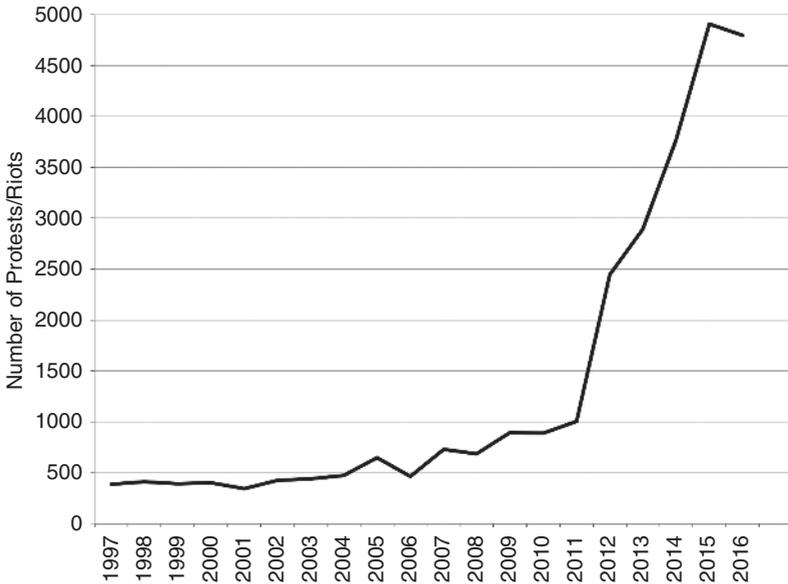


Figure 1.1: Protest/Riot Frequency in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1997–2016
 Data are from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Raleigh et al., 2010).

the 1990s (Dionne, Banch, and Mampilly, 2015). The intensity of social disturbances was as impressive as their frequency. While there is no comprehensive database of protest participation levels, news reports cited turnout reaching hundreds of thousands in certain cases (*Al Jazeera*, 2012; Allison, 2012). A recent dip in protest frequency (Figure 1.1) suggests that the third wave has peaked, though it is too early to tell. Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama vented, “I have seen more demonstrations and strikes in my first two years. I don’t think it can get worse. It is said that when you kill a goat and you frighten it with a knife, it doesn’t fear the knife, because it is dead already. I have dead goat syndrome” (Quist-Arcton, 2015). Protests³ in sub-Saharan Africa between 2011 and 2016 received less media attention than the Arab Spring (Antwi-Boateng, 2015, 774), but they were no less varied or dynamic. Youths spray-painted opposition slogans on monuments in Dakar and demonstrators squeezed beneath the

³ By “protests” I mean collective actions aimed at achieving a goal by influencing decisions of a target (Opp, 2009, 38).

gates of the U.S. Embassy in Bujumbura to escape government repression. More than a thousand people were arrested for protesting the narrow re-election of President Ali Bongo in Gabon. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, an untold number of rioters died preempting President Joseph Kabila's refusal to step down when his term limit expired. This was the first era in which protests also played out on the Internet: Activist social media lit up with Facebook posts supporting Occupy Nigeria, YouTube videos promoting political hip-hop from Tanzania, and Twitter campaigns to free activists from Congolese prisons. This boom of discontent sent shockwaves through top tiers of government. Citizens thwarted the autocratic maneuvers of presidents in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal, to name just a few. Existing scholarship teaches us that such turmoil can influence a host of other important phenomena like democracy, development, and human rights (Baudais and Chauzal, 2011; Beaulieu, 2014; Oxford Analytica, 2015).

What explains the third wave of protests in sub-Saharan Africa? Early analyses pointed to the influence of protests outside the region (de Waal and Ibreck, 2013). Scholars and journalists described "an African Spring in the making" (Harsch, 2012; Dibba, 2013; Sowore, 2013). Ugandan intellectual Mahmood Mamdani wrote, "... the memory of Tahrir Square feeds opposition hopes and fuels government fears in many African polities. A spectre is haunting Africa and its rulers – the spectre of Tahrir Square" (Mamdani, 2011). Former Chadian minister of foreign affairs Acheikh Ibn-Oumar postulated, "when demonstrators in Tahrir Square, Habib Bourguiba Avenue, or Al Mahkama Square (Benghazi) shouted their anger against protracted dictatorship ... many Africans felt they had been victims to the same evils for ages" (Ibn-Oumar, 2013). North Africans echoed the view that their revolutions emboldened Africans south of the Sahara. "Nothing aids the erosion of one's fear," said one Egyptian journalist, "more than knowing there are others, somewhere else, who share the same desire for liberation – and have started taking action" (el Hamalawy, 2011).

It is possible that some protesters were inspired by the Arab Spring, but north-south contagion is not a satisfying explanation for the latest wave of uprisings in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because economic and political conditions are markedly different across the two regions. Arab Spring protesters were disproportionately – if not uniformly – educated

and middle-class (Andersen, 2011; The World Bank, 2015). The middle class in sub-Saharan Africa is growing (Ncube and Lufumpa, 2015) and is more likely than the poor to support democracy (Cheeseman, 2014), but it is still relatively tiny at only about one-third the size of the middle class in North Africa and the Middle East (Kharas, 2011; *The Economist*, 2015). Protests in Blantyre, Lagos, and other cities brought many thousands of people to the streets – more than local populations of salaried professionals and business owners could realistically supply.

Scholars have begun to criticize the narrative of a middle-class revolt for downplaying “the very real participation of poorer and more marginalized classes” (Branch and Mampilly, 2015, 203). A prominent counter-narrative states that people in sub-Saharan Africa are rising up because they are hungry or resent inequality, not because they oppose dictatorship on ideological grounds (Smith, 2013; Berazneva and Lee, 2013; Lofchie, 2015). The main support for this claim is the failure of economic growth to produce significant improvements in well-being. Sub-Saharan Africa’s total GDP per capita has improved starting around 1995 (The World Bank, 2017), but aggregate gains mask the persistence of poverty that would not exist if total income were distributed equally. The number of Africans living on less than a dollar a day rose from 140 million in 1975 to over 360 million in 2000, during a period culminating in significant economic expansion (Artadi and Sala-i-Martin, 2003, 7). In 1970, one in ten poor people in the world was African; by 2000, the fraction was close to one in two (Artadi and Sala-i-Martin, 2003, 7).⁴

Poverty and inequality are not the same thing, but inequality “acts as a filter between growth and poverty” (Nissanke and Thorbecke, 2006, 1339). When growth occurs in countries that are very poor at the outset, people at the bottom of an unequal income distribution experience inequality as chronic poverty (Milanovic, 2016b). Noting this macroeconomic situation and the small middle class in sub-Saharan Africa, some analysts argue that protests in the region cannot be likened to the Arab Spring (Antwi-Boateng, 2015; Kigwangalla, 2014). Their arguments find further evidence in a 2013 Gallup poll of

⁴ These increases partly reflect population growth, which scholars warn could produce a Malthusian dilemma, especially in the Sahel (Potts, Henderson, and Campbell, 2013).

people in twenty-six sub-Saharan African countries, which revealed that seven in ten respondents had not followed recent political developments in the Arab world (Loschky, 2014). In countries where poverty is widespread, the middle class is presumably more likely to be the target of protests than the vanguard of revolution (Lofchie, 2015, 53).

Beyond economic differences, political regimes in sub-Saharan Africa barely resemble political regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. One could say that sub-Saharan Africa already experienced its African Spring more than a decade ago. Between 1990 and 1994, fifty-four founding elections took place in twenty-nine countries across the region (Bratton, 1998). Multi-party competition has become routine since Bratton and van de Walle (1992, 419) prophetically wrote about “the turbulent ‘spring’ of 1990.” Practically all African leaders after 1990 have exited office by means of term limits or elections; very few have left through coups d’état or assassinations (Cheeseman, 2015; Posner and Young, 2007). The strength of democratic institutions varies considerably across countries (Bratton, 1998; Bratton and Mattes, 2009), but “democracy in sub-Saharan Africa is not starting from scratch, unlike in most of the Arab world” (Siegle et al., 2011, 1). Elections, even when not perfectly free and fair, seem to have enhanced African voters’ awareness of their rights, spawned civil society organizations, and created new roles for state institutions and the media (Lindberg, 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). These changes have in turn expanded civil liberties well beyond the levels that most people in North Africa and the Middle East enjoy: Freedom House rates sub-Saharan Africa as 12 percent free and North Africa and the Middle East as only 5 percent free (Freedom House, 2015). Democratic transitions do not, of course, guarantee stronger states. State control over people and territory remains weaker in sub-Saharan Africa than in other parts of the world (Herbst, 2000). States like Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo are notoriously ineffective at providing citizens with public goods such as health care and rule of law, even if they are quite effective at providing “public bads” such as state-sanctioned violence and environmental degradation. The contradictory mixes of freedom with repression and state weakness with state brutality make sub-Saharan Africa politically exceptional (Herbst, 2000; Englebert, 2009; Young, 2012).

For all three reasons – poorer populations, stronger democracies, and weaker states – protests in Ouagadougou or Nairobi might be systematically different from protests in Tripoli or Algiers. Perhaps the former are not “an African Spring in the making” but rather something altogether different. An obvious alternative interpretation is that protests in sub-Saharan Africa are materially motivated revolts of the poor – bread riots, essentially (Smith, 2013; Berazneva and Lee, 2013; Macatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet, 2010; Adam, 2008). This narrative is consistent with what we know about the region’s general economic and political conditions, but it is ultimately just as unsatisfying as the narrative of a middle-class revolution. A long line of research suggests that mobilizing collective action is extremely difficult under any circumstances, because coordinating large groups is costly, and risk-averse individuals free-ride on the anticipated participation of others (Olson, 1971; Tarrow, 1998; Weinstein, 2007). Resource scarcity further hinders collective action by limiting access to “mobilization goods” such as selective incentives, transportation, and communication technology (Bates, 1981). In short, political science predicts that poverty should correlate with less protest, not more. Sociologists respond that absolute or relative deprivation can inflame popular grievances that are necessary for protest to occur (Gurr, 1970; Cramer, 2003). However, grievances are latent and ubiquitous; they cannot explain the timing of protests or how aggrieved people overcome collective action problems (Corning and Myers, 2002).

The Argument

Some observers see the third wave of protests in sub-Saharan Africa as a politically motivated revolution of the middle class akin to the Arab Spring, whereas others label it a materially driven revolt of the chronically poor. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Members of an emerging middle class desire political influence commensurate with their economic status and possess the money, education, and communication skills that make them effective protest organizers. Meanwhile, most rank-and-file protesters in sub-Saharan Africa are not middle-class but rather live at a subsistence level. This group is motivated foremost by materialist concerns – especially low expectations of upward mobility – and not by grievances against a ruling

regime. People abstain from protesting even amid objectively bad conditions because they are optimistic, not necessarily because they are too oppressed or disenfranchised.

Africa's third wave of protests resulted when middle-class people reacted to political shocks by deploying their talents and resources to mobilize poor people who harbored latent materialist grievances. I use Afrobarometer surveys from thirty-one African countries and original data from seven months of field research in Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Malawi to show that middle-class political grievances help explain the timing of protests, while lower-class materialist grievances help explain protest participation. Analyzing these data in their historical context, I observe some continuity with the past: The middle class and the poor have protested in sub-Saharan Africa since before independence, often against one another. What sets the third wave apart, I assert, is the symbiotic roles that these groups increasingly play: Middle-class people serve as strategic leaders of political opposition movements (what I call "the generals of the revolution") and poorer people serve as strategic joiners ("the foot soldiers of the revolution"). They form protest coalitions, pooling resources while keeping their distinct identities.⁵

Generals and foot soldiers are both integral to a social movement, no matter how hierarchical or horizontal the movement's structure (Hardt and Negri, 2017). A protest with weak, resource-strapped leadership may have trouble getting off the ground in the first place, while one without an enthusiastic mass following is unlikely to grow or last. Protests thus involve "a provisional equalization of relationships" (Mische, 2011, 82) in which actors depend on each other and jointly determine what Shorter and Tilly (1971) call the "shape" of protests – onset, growth, and duration. This idea stems from the field of Relational Sociology, which underscores existing connections among potential allies and "the creative effort people make establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations" (Zelizer, 2011). Protests are not merely embedded in the context of class; they are constituted by class conflicts and affinities.

⁵ Coalitions differ from mergers, which fuse constituent group identities, and networks, which have looser ties and little purposive collective action (McCammon and Moon, 2015).

Class Analysis and the Study of African Politics

A class-centered explanation for Africa's third wave of protests – or any other aspect of African politics – is unconventional. Class analysis, though canonical in political science as a whole, “has not been as popular or successful” in the study of African politics (Englebert and Dunn, 2013, 109). The analytical frameworks of Karl Marx (1846/1963), E.P. Thompson (1963), or Barrington Moore (1978) bewilder scholars of African politics because Africa's low levels of industrial capitalism make it difficult to apply categories like “workers” and “owners of the means of production.”⁶ Manufactured exports comprise only 55 percent of total exports in the typical African country, compared to 76 percent in the typical non-African developing country (Page, 2012, ii96). African leaders in the early post-independence era, eager to shed dependence on former colonial powers, pushed their countries to industrialize by sheltering domestic producers and building factories with public funds. State-led import substitution ultimately proved unsustainable, and African countries de-industrialized in the 1980s and early 1990s (Page, 2012, ii95). Light manufacturing is a point of entry into the formal labor force in emerging economies, especially for women and young people (Ross, 2008). Today, however, African manufacturing sectors are even smaller and less diverse than during the first decade of independence (Page, 2012). The region's youth unemployment rate of 11.9 percent falls below the world average of 13.1 percent but is far higher in certain countries. Almost half of youth in South Africa, for instance, cannot find work (Amare, 2014). “Would that I had an employer to exploit me!” is the cynical sentiment of a few African job-seekers I have encountered. Observing low participation in the formal workforce reinforces scholars' preconception that African societies have no economic classes whatsoever (Stichter, 1975; Grillo, 1974) or that ethnicity at least dominates class as more politically significant (Jackson, 1973).

There are dangers in adhering to orthodox views about a “classless Africa.” First, those views may simply be incorrect if one adopts a broader understanding of class as determined not just by relations

⁶ Studies of India seem to confirm “the difficulties of class organization in the so-called informal sector of labor, where the capitalist and the petty mode of production are intertwined in a mutually reinforcing tangle” (Chatterjee, 2006, 64).

of production, but also by relations of power (Sklar, 1979; Daloz, 2003). Some scholars point out ways in which corrupt African leaders use state institutions to accumulate wealth and oppress the poor (Daloz, 2003; Sklar, 1979; Diamond, 1987; Boone, 1998). They employ the vocabulary of “the state class” and “the political class” alongside the Marxist vocabulary of “capitalists” and “the bourgeoisie” (Keller, 1991a; Boone, 1998; Amin, 1969; Swainson, 1977). Fauré and Médard (1995) introduce the hybrid terms “state-business” and “politicians-entrepreneurs”; Markovitz (1987) adds the “organizational bourgeoisie.” Studying “bourgeois” social movements in Nigeria, Olukoshi (1995) writes about “primitive” forms of wealth accumulation via the misappropriation of public funds. Such adapted class frameworks are useful for comprehending the politics of exclusion and state contributions to Africa’s extreme inequalities in income, wealth, and consumption.⁷ This book explains how those inequalities shape the onset and size of protests through the channels of grievances and resource mobilization.

Another downside of dismissing class frameworks is the risk of assuming that Africans are monolithically poor and that differences in economic standing are politically irrelevant. Africans of disparate means need not form self-conscious classes “in themselves and for themselves,” as Marx envisioned, in order for economic disparities to become politicized; nor do Africans need to form labor unions and go on strike, although they sometimes do (Zeilig, 2009). The political importance of class in Africa is subtler: It influences the grievances that make people *want* to protest and the access to mobilization goods that make them *able* to protest. Ignoring class differences has impeded scholars from unearthing satisfying explanations for Africa’s third wave of protests, because protests in contemporary Africa contain both middle-class and popular elements. I use class to contextualize actors’ motivations, resources, and behavioral choices while acknowledging the limitations of an orthodox class framework in African settings.

I define the African middle class as *the stratum of Africans who meet their basic material needs with income from sources outside the state.*

⁷ For data and commentary on inequality in Africa, see Cogneau et al. (2006); Christiaensen, Demery, and Stefano (2002); Frankema and Bolt (2006); Okojie and Shimeles (2006).

I do not rely on the classical Marxist understanding of the middle class as the bourgeoisie (roughly, the class between the elite and the proletariat),⁸ because the powers of consumption and political participation are often more salient than the power of production in largely un-industrialized African societies. I depart, too, from common income-based metrics (e.g., Ncube, Anyanwu, and Hausken, 2013). Income cut-offs are arbitrary and do not travel well across geographic space (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008). They also ignore the sociological, as opposed to the economic, connotations of class (Ansell and Samuels, 2014, 39). My working definition of the middle class disagrees with some existing definitions. I aim not to advance a universal theory of the middle class, but rather to avoid “conceptual stretching” by adopting a “diminished subtype” of the core concept that refers to a specific set of African cases (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). I follow Darbon (2014) in treating the middle class not as an objective given, but rather as a “code name” that lets us decipher social phenomena like protest.⁹

The middle class emerged in Africa from economic liberalization in the late twentieth century, which generated opportunities to accumulate private wealth but also to spend private incomes on consumer goods and political causes. Before then, the “middle class” was best described as the state class; loyalty to the state was the primary path to upward mobility, creating a conflict of interests for the would-be political opposition. In the 1990s, Western-mediated integration of developing countries into the global capitalist economy sharpened class differences along both political and economic dimensions. “The result has been, on the one hand, greater assertion by organizations of middle-class citizens of their right to unhindered access to public spaces ... On the other hand, government policy has rapidly turned away from the idea of helping the poor to subsist ...” (Chatterjee, 2006, 144). Economic categories are essential for comprehending Africa’s third wave of protests because they are inseparable from the political autonomy of the middle class and the material adversity of the poor.

My focus on class is reminiscent of earlier work on class relations and modernization theory by Lipset (1959), Moore (1978), Collier (1999),

⁸ Marxist theory lacks a single, coherent concept of class (Kivinen, 1989).

⁹ For more on the meaning and importance of the African middle class, see Melber (2016), Darbon and Toulabor (2014), Ncube and Lufumpa (2015), and Sumner (2012).