Political Protest in Contemporary Africa

From spray-painted slogans in Senegal to student uprisings in South Africa, twenty-first century Africa has seen an explosion of protests and social movements. But why? Protests flourish amidst an emerging middle class whose members desire political influence and possess the money, education, and political autonomy to effectively launch movements for democratic renewal. In contrast with pro-democracy protest leaders, rank-and-file protesters live at a subsistence level and are motivated by material concerns over any grievance against a ruling regime. Through extensive field research, Lisa Mueller shows that middle-class political grievances help explain the timing of protests, while lower-class material grievances explain the participation. By adapting a class-based analysis to African cases where class is often assumed to be irrelevant, Lisa Mueller provides a rigorous yet accessible explanation for why sub-Saharan Africa erupted in unrest at a time of apparent economic prosperity.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

"The president is long dead," I often overheard while I was in Conakry, Guinea. I traveled there in 2008 to find a research question for my doctoral dissertation. By then, rumors about President Lansana Conté's death were almost cliché. In power for twenty-four years, Conté suffered from chronic diabetes and heart disease. His authoritarian regime was deeply unpopular; to some Guineans, the gossip may have been wishful thinking. Yet, unfounded text messages and whispers had swirled for so long that they became like crying wolf. The president occasionally appeared on television to prove he was still alive, and I expected him to reappear any day.

But in the early morning of December 23, 2008, I gathered with my Guinean friends around the radio to hear the head of the National Assembly confirm that Conté had finally succumbed to his illnesses. Within hours, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara announced a military takeover of the government and suspension of the constitution. The coup d'état was, he claimed, the only way to undo rampant poverty and corruption of the Conté era. At the time, not even the capital city had reliable electricity – students studied at the airport because it was the only building with light at night. Some Guineans initially welcomed the junta's visions of change. Dadis pledged to restore democracy and vowed not to run for president. He ultimately reneged on both promises.

I evacuated the country amid a threat of civil war, but I continued following every news update from Guinea. On September 28, 2009, opposition leaders defied a ban on public assembly by rallying 50,000 citizens to demand a return to civilian rule. The demonstration took place at the Stade 28 Septembre in Conkary, on the fifty-first anniversary of a referendum in which Guineans voted for complete independence from France. Government troops opened fire on the crowd, killing at least 157 people, injuring innumerable others, and

raping women in broad daylight. Eyewitnesses reported seeing soldiers drag bodies away to hide the true death count. One of my friends sustained a non-life-threatening wound while standing up for his democratic rights.

What, I wondered, led some Guineans to risk their lives in protest while others chose to stay home? What fears and hopes raced through the minds of people at the stadium that day? Was the demonstration about democracy plain and simple, or about something else, too? These puzzles applied to contexts beside Guinea. In 2011, I went to Niger to try and understand protests surrounding another putsch in which army officers ousted President Mamadou Tandja for trying to change the constitution and remain in office for a third term. That research motivated this book, which eventually expanded to address protest leadership and not just participation.

I am grateful for the countless friends, colleagues, and students who made the project possible. Thierno Mamadou Sow was by my side in those distressing moments of the Guinean coup and has since been a consummate project manager, sounding board, and champion during my fieldwork in several countries. Kim Dionne invited me to collaborate in Malawi, where I had the chance to observe student protests in 2011. I also owe a debt to my Nigerien research team, especially Bachirou Ayouba Tinni, Adam Malla, and Moussa Yayé. The Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local was my operating base in Niger; the West African Research Center hosted me in Senegal. I spent many non-working hours in the field with Sue Rosenfeld, who welcomed me into her Niamey home and was always up for a drink at the Grand Hôtel.

I extend my appreciation to the thousands of people in Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Malawi who answered my survey and interview questions. They were generous with their knowledge, which I hope to disseminate accurately and report back to them in an ongoing conversation. Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions," including vestiges of Western imperialism (Smith, 2012, 5). As I penned the last word of this manuscript, the hard work of decolonizing my scholarship and my thoughts was only just beginning.

Chapters 5 and 6 started as parts of a dissertation that I wrote at the University of California–Los Angeles under the guidance of Miriam Golden, Daniel Posner, Edmond Keller, and Pierre Englebert. Pierre was also my undergraduate advisor at Pomona College and is a close friend and mentor to this day. Against his better judgment, he let me into his advanced African Politics seminar during my first semester. His courses laid the foundation for everything I have written, though all the mistakes are my own. Chapter 5 additionally benefited from Afrobarometer surveys, whose creators do a great service to the scholarly community by making their data available.

It was my immense fortune to complete this project at Macalester College, where I received endless support. I knocked on almost every door in the Political Science department at one time or another seeking advice, and each time found inspiration and clarity. In the spring of 2016, I taught a course on "The Politics of Fear and Hope: Africa from Colonial Times to the Cheetah Generation." The entire class participated in my book workshop, which was funded by the G. Theodore Mitau Endowment, and commented on chapters in progress. Two students, Lukas Matthews and Susanna Figueroa, lent diligent research assistance over the summers. Colleagues at and beyond Macalester provided feedback on drafts at various stages. Paul Dosh, Zachariah Mampilly, and Pierre Englebert read the full manuscript. Further input came from members of the Sahel Working Group, the Working Group in African Political Economy, and informal circles: Sebastian Elischer, Martha Wilfahrt, Abhit Bhandari, Alice Kang, Amy Damon, Landry Signé, Emily Beaulieu, Ruth Carlitz, Dan Eizenga, Catherine Kelly, Julia YuJung Lee, Raffaele Asquer, Devesh Tiwari, Eric Kramon, and Amy Porter. Thanks to two anonymous peer reviewers and to Maria Marsh, my commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, for facilitating the review process.

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