

DRAFT:
May 2011

**PRO-DEMOCRACY UPRISINGS IN
AFRICA'S EXPERIENCE:
FROM SHARPEVILLE TO BENGHAZI**

**By
Ali A. Mazrui**

**Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies
and
Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities
Binghamton University
State University of New York at Binghamton, New York, USA**

**Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large
University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria**

**Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus
and Senior Scholar In Africana Studies
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA**

**Senior Fellow,
Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian
Understanding,
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA**

**President,
Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America
(AMSS)
Washington, D.C., USA**

Among the intriguing paradoxes of South Africa's history is the fact that this land is the last country on the African continent to be liberated, and yet it is also among the first to be truly democratized. In our context here, liberation is either from racial minority rule or from colonialism in the imperial sense. On the other hand, democratization is either the quest for, or the consolidation of a system which combines government's accountability, with popular participation, and links the pursuit of social justice with the open society.

Almost every other African country which attained liberation from European colonial rule in the 20th century was unable to maintain its democratic order beyond its first decade of independence. Within that first decade either the military captured power, or the elected president became a dictator, or a civil war broke out, or the ruling party outlawed any rival political party and turned the country into a single-party state.

The Republic of South Africa, on the other hand, liberated Nelson Mandela in 1990, held its first democratic election in 1994, and is now with its third president. Nearly two decades after apartheid South Africa has not outlawed opposition parties, or experienced a military

coup, or permitted the Head of State to govern the country as a dictator.

But what role have pro-democracy uprisings played in South Africa's transition from racial liberation to genuine democratization? In 1960 black people of South Africa focused on the pass-laws of apartheid as the main instruments of control. Both the African National Congress and the newly-formed Pan-African Congress started planning for a possible series of protests as part of a general anti-pass uprising in 1960 to commemorate the anniversary of the anti-pass-laws campaign of 1919.

The height of the drama occurred in Sharpeville when five thousand protesters confronted three hundred policemen in March 1960. These so-called security forces in Sharpeville went to the extent of using live ammunition. To add insult to injury, armoured vehicles and air force jets were used to deepen the atmosphere of intimidation. The protesters were unarmed and had been using Gandhian methods of non-violent disobedience and passive resistance.

Official figures of casualties claimed that 69 were killed and 180 were seriously injured. Unofficial calculations estimated casualties in their hundreds, including many people shot in the back as they were trying to run away from the indiscriminate violence.

Sharpeville and its memory became iconic in the struggle against apartheid. The killings, beatings and large scale imprisonment of hundreds of people virtually destroyed the dream of ending apartheid by non-violent means and passive resistance. Both the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress started seriously considering armed struggle in pursuit of a more democratic order in South Africa.

And yet Sharpeville continued to be an inspiration for collective protests elsewhere in Africa. While Sharpeville coincided with the liberation from colonialism of 17 other African countries in the same year of 1960, the Soweto uprising in 1976 coincided with the 200th anniversary of the outbreak of the American war of independence in 1776. But while in the case of America's independence the relevant month of celebration was July 1776, the relevant month of celebration for the Soweto uprising was June 1976.

However, a big difference between both Sharpeville and the American war of independence, on one side, and the uprising in Soweto, on the other was generational. Soweto was a rebellion of young people – while the two earlier historic eruptions were inter-generational.

Approximately 20,000 African students exploded into the Soweto uprising on June 16, 1976, protesting the marginalization of indigenous languages in black schools, and the imposition of Afrikaans and English as media of instruction in most of the syllabus. Particularly offensive to the young people was the imposition of Afrikaans, which black people widely regarded as a language of oppression.

While the American Boston Tea Party in 1776 used "taxation with representation" as a symbol of liberation, and Sharpeville used abolition of "the pass laws", the youth of Soweto believed in "no choice of communication without choice of representation". Language policy in education was at the center of the Soweto uprising. It was reinforced by the support of the Black Consciousness Movement. Language was allied to black nationalism.

We mentioned that 20,000 students revolted in Soweto. Nearly 180 of the students paid with their lives. Particularly moving was young Hector Pieterse who was fatally wounded, and was carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo in a dramatic photograph which captured the imagination of the world. Pieterse arrived dead at the local clinic. June 16, 1976 continues to be celebrated in post-apartheid South Africa as a milestone in the history of the struggle.

This last country on the African continent to be racially liberated became one of the first to be truly democratized. The formerly oppressed of Sharpeville, Soweto and elsewhere in South Africa were much later to be followed by the pro-democracy protesters of Tunisia and Egypt early in 2011, and by the armed rebels of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya soon after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. North Africa in 2011, like Soweto in 1976, was led by the youth. The young not only read history in the classroom; they made history in the streets of destiny.

Let us look more closely at the different intermediate stages between Sharpeville in 1960 and Tahrir Square in 2011, and between the Soweto uprising in 1976 and Benghazi after Gaddafi's 42 years in power.

50 YEARS OF AFRICA'S STRUGGLE FOR THE OPEN SOCIETY: FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO LIBYA

Phase I: The Anti-Colonial Phase

World War II triggered new waves of anti-colonial struggle. Leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia considered Gandhian methods of passive resistance and non-

violent strikes. Albert Luthuli became Africa's first Nobel Laureate for Peace in 1960 for championing peaceful struggle.

Leaders like Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania and Leopold Senghor of Senegal adopted non-confrontational agitation for decolonization.

Movements like Mau Mau in Kenya and the National Liberation Front in Algeria engaged in armed struggle against colonial rule.

Ghana became independent in 1957 – but it was preceded by Sudan and Tunisia who attained sovereignty in 1956. In 1960 seventeen additional African countries became independent in a single year, as we indicated earlier.

Phase II: The Struggle Against Racial Minority Governments

In Rhodesia the target was Ian Smith's white regime in rebellion against Great Britain, the world community and the aspirations of African peoples. Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (U.D.I.) plunged Zimbabwe into 15 years of bloodletting.

Robert Mugabe was successful in gaining independence for Zimbabwe but has had a hard time creating a post-racial society.

In the first two years there was a lot of anti-black racism in Harare, the newly renamed capital of Zimbabwe. When I complained to him in 1982 of white racism in the restaurants of independent

Zimbabwe, Mugabe enumerated three methods of teaching one's citizens to become non-racist: by non-racist example, by anti-racist persuasion and education, and thirdly, by the use of force to promote a post-racial society.

In 1960 South Africa witnessed the massacre of Sharpeville, and in 1976 the revolt of Soweto erupted. In South Africa the struggle continued longer than in Zimbabwe, but achieved positive results more fully than did the smaller country. In South Africa the pace of change speeded up when Nelson Mandela was released after twenty-seven years of imprisonment. The African National Congress had been banned for decades.

A deal was struck in the early 1990s. The whites agreed to give blacks the crown if whites could retain the jewels. In 1994 Nelson Mandela was able to wear the political crown, while white South Africans still enjoyed the economic jewels.

Phase III: The Struggle for a More Pluralistic Constitutional Order

Large scale uprising occurred from time to time. Black Africa was partly inspired by anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe, partly by the First Palestinian intifadah against Israel, and partly by

the agitation in China's Tiananmen Square in Beijing when the young were in revolt.

Africans were demanding a multiparty system, the elimination of detention without trial, the minimization of corruption, and new steps against military coups from the 1980s to the end of the 20th century. Africa witnessed widespread abolition of single-party systems, drastic reduction of military coups, and legitimation of rival political parties. South Africa was later spared some of these lapses and arrested democratization.

Phase IV: The Struggle for Full Democracy by Popular Uprising

Sudan set the precedent of civilian non-violent demonstrations against military rule. Sharpeville was fresh in Sudanese memories in the mid-1960s. Non-violent popular eruptions occurred:

- against General Ibrahim Abboud in Sudan in 1964
- against General Jaafar Nimeiry also in Sudan in 1985

The two Sudanese uprisings did not trigger imitation either in sub-Saharan Africa or in the Arab world – in spite of the fact that the old Sudan shared borders with nine other countries.

There was greater participation by Sudanese women in the 1985 uprising against Jaafar Nimeiry than there was in the 1964 uprising

against General Ibrahim Abboud. The trend was towards greater political awareness among women. South Africa had led the way with female protesters in both Sharpeville and Soweto.

Women were outraged by Nimeiry's decision to execute Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, an old man who was radically re-interpreting Islam in a more liberal direction. Taha's book in the English language was published under the title of The Second Message of Islam (Evanston: Northwestern University Press).

But there was another reason why Sudanese women were less evident in the uprising against General Ibrahim Abboud in 1964 than in the uprising against General Jaafar Nimeiry in 1985. Sudanese Universities had far fewer women students in the 1960s than they did in the 1980s. Female students enhanced the numbers of those who protested against Nimeiry more noticeably than they did in the outburst against Abboud twenty years earlier.

In the current 2011 uprising in the Arab world women have had a pronounced presence in situations in which the opposition has engaged in protest but not in situations when the opposition has resorted to rebellion. Tunisia and Egypt were cases when the

opposition had consisted of protesters, but in Libya the opposition turned into rebels.

But what is the difference between *protest* and *rebellion*? The difference is when the opposition is *armed*. The Libyan opposition turned to weapons and transformed the conflict into a civil war.

The Tunisian and Egyptian opposition tried to be non-violent throughout the struggle. So were the protesters in Sharpeville in 1960 and in Soweto in 1976.

The Tunisian Style

What has now been called “the Arab awakening” was triggered by the uprising in Tunisia in January 2011 against the regime of Zeinal Abideen Ben Ali.

Was it merely a coincidence that Tunisia as a country led in the 20th century the whole of the Arab world in women’s liberation? The seed of Tunisia’s liberation of women goes back to the early years of the 20th century.

By the 1920s Tunisia had produced an outstanding Islamic reformer who belonged to the Great Mosque of the Zaitouna. The man’s name was Tahar Haddad who championed the liberation of women from the shackles of what he regarded as un-Islamic customs and taboos. In 1930 he published his influential book *Our Women in*

the Sharia and Society – arguing that Islamic teachings had been distorted to the disadvantage of women.

Tunisian women were inspired by Haddad but initially decided to join the national struggle against French colonialism rather than fight feminist battles. Women patriots started being arrested by French colonialists as early as 1938. By 1950 the leading Neo-Destour party opened its first women's section. Many women agitators against France were from time to time arrested and imprisoned.

On attainment of independence on March 20, 1956, women's credentials as Tunisian patriots were so strong that the first postcolonial Tunisian President, Habib Bourguiba, leader of the Neo-Destour Party, declared within months of independence [August 13, 1956] that Tunisia owed its women a debt of gratitude not only for their roles as mothers, wives and sisters, but also for their roles as nationalists and patriots.

Tunisia led the Arab world by promulgating a Code of Personal Status "removing all injustices against women" and "conferring upon women their full rights". Such ideas were echoed by both the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress in South Africa.

Tunisia was the first Arab country to outlaw polygamy – but not the first Muslim country. Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had led

the way in improving the status of women in marriage, inheritance, and dress culture. Much later Turkey became the first Muslim country in the Middle East to elect a female Prime Minister – Tansu Çiller.

In Tunisia women in the year 2011 were significant participants in the pro-democracy uprising. They were protestors rather than rebels. It remains to be seen if Tunisia will become the first Arab country to elect a woman Prime Minister or a woman President.

Although there have already been at least four Muslim countries [Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia as well as Turkey] which have produced women Prime Ministers and one President, none of them was an Arab country.

If Tunisia in 2011 led the Arab pro-democratic awakening, was it partly because it had led the Arabs half a century earlier in women's liberation?

The immediate trigger of the Tunisian uprising was the self-immolation of a young trader who was victimized by bureaucrats at the expense of his livelihood. Muhammad Bouazizi set himself aflame in protest. Although politically inspired self-immolation is much more rare in Muslim countries than among Hindus and Buddhists elsewhere, the Tunisian suicide of a food cart vendor in January 2011 was widely regarded by Tunisians as a case of heroic martyrdom. The physical

flames which consumed the young man became a political flame which helped to light a revolution. Tunisian mothers were reportedly particularly moved by the young man's rage. So were South African mothers in 1976 when nearly 180 students rose and were killed in Soweto.

The Egyptian Precedents

The Egyptian uprising of 2011 against Hosni Mubarak finally succeeded in ousting Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

Women were very visible participants in the protests of Tahrir Square. Egyptian women – though among the best educated in Africa and the Muslim world – were not as liberated as the women of Tunisia and Turkey.

But historically Egypt has led the way in female empowerment in other ways. The first great female ruler in recorded history was probably the Egyptian Hatshepsut who reigned from 1479 to 1458 before Christ. [BCE]

Because Pharaohs were supposed to be male, Hatshepsut was represented in statues with a false beard! But she was a strong ruler – and is widely regarded as a forerunner of such tough future female rulers as Catherine the Great, Elizabeth I and Indira Gandhi.

Other great women rulers of Egypt itself included Pharaoh Akhenaton's co-Regent, Queen Nefertiti and Cleopatra VII, arguably the last Pharaoh of ancient Egypt, though less indigenous than either Hatshepsut or Nefertiti.

Cleopatra was North Africa's great woman ruler. Her life was from 69 BCE to 30 BCE. Her reign was from 51 BCE to 30 BCE.

Egypt has always been the northern extension of sub-Saharan Africa, the Southern extension of Mediterranean Europe, and later became the Eastern extension of Arabia.

These influences probably eventually have helped the relative liberation of Egyptian women. They have been much freer than the women of the Arabian Peninsula. Did this empower them in Tahrir Square as protestors in February 2011?

The Libyan Legacy

Muammar Gaddafi has ruled Libya since the military coup of 1969. He has been less important as a social or religious reformer domestically than in his efforts to be a political player globally.

On the gender question Gaddafi has used symbolism. Far from regarding women as unsuited for military roles, or incapable of using firearms efficiently, Gaddafi theoretically entrusted his life to female bodyguards. These are often referred to as "the Amazons".

The Pope in history has had the physical protection of the Swiss guards and the spiritual protection of the Virgin Mary. Gaddafi has had women body guards who were spiritually required to be virgins.

On the link between virginity and military effectiveness, Gaddafi in North Africa in the 21st century has shared a characteristic with Shaka Zulu of South Africa in the eighteenth century. Shaka wanted his male soldiers to be celibate, totally denying themselves sex. Gaddafi has wanted his female guards as virgins from the start – and committed to celibacy until military retirement.

But since the current uprising erupted in the second half of February 2011, there has been no evidence of female soldiers protecting Gaddafi. Actually, there have been more female warriors in the opposition in Benghazi than among Gaddafi's forces in Tripoli.

Much more interesting is Gaddafi's decision from the 1990s that he was an African first and an Arab second. He got disenchanted with fellow Arabs – having first begun as a Pan-Arabist. But in the last twenty years he has put his money more in Pan-African ventures than in Pan-Arabist projects. He saw himself less and less as heir to Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and more and more as heir to Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

Over dinner in Gaddafi's tent as his guest some years ago I found myself defending the Arabs against Gaddafi's hostility. I was also astonished when Gaddafi asked me to send him a copy of my father's book, The Mazrui Dynasty of Mombasa. It was part of his fascination with Afrabia. The book was published by Oxford University Press in the 1990s.

In the present situation Gaddafi has paid a price for preferring his African identity. He has alienated fellow Arabs to a disastrous extent. The Arab League virtually gave the green light to the Security Council and the Western powers to bomb Gaddafi's Libya. His fellow Arabs threw him under the bus!

Yearnings of Yemen

An Arab country outside Africa which may also be drifting towards a civil war is YEMEN under President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yemen's links to Africa include their own settlements in East Africa and the Horn of Africa – especially from the Yemeni sub-region of Hadhramount. Such Hadhrami settlers were highly visible in Mombasa as shopkeepers, merchants, intellectuals and Muslim missionaries. Many became assimilated and Swahilized.

On the gender question this is partly neutralized by the Yemeni equivalent of “the right to bear arms”. Yemen is the most heavily armed of all Arab countries at the level of individuals and families. It has been estimated that virtually all adult males not only own, but often wear arms in Yemen. Some families even own a tank or two, often marked “Private” – though this may be a hyperbole.

This culture of militarized manhood (macho) has contributed to the extra marginalization of women. Yemen is also the poorest Arab country. However, it is worth remembering the more eminent of Yemeni’s female leaders, such as the Executive Editor of *The Yemeni Times*.

The most famous woman in the history of Yemen is the Queen of Sheba. Jewish, Biblical and Qur’anic versions of the Queen of Sheba place her in a kingdom called Sarba in Yemen instead of in Ethiopia. So Yemen competes with Ethiopia in claiming Sheba.

But Ethiopia is taking the legacy of Sheba much more energetically than do the Yemenis. Emperor Menelik I is supposed to have been the offspring of Solomon and Sheba. Indeed, Ethiopians believe that King Solomon’s Ark of the Covenant is protected today in St. Mary’s Church in Aksum. The divine right of the Emperor is traced to the Covenant.

To top it all, modern Ethiopia produced the first Empress of today's history of Black Africa. This was Queen Zewditu, daughter of Menelik II (1844-1913). Zewditu reigned from 1916 to 1930. More than half a century later Liberia produced Africa's first elected female Head of State – Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

Conclusion

For the first time in the history of the Middle East at least ten Arab countries have witnessed pro-democracy demonstrations in varying degrees of intensity. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have already resulted in ousting dictators who had been entrenched in power for decades. In Libya a third dictator's future is on the line. Other Arab countries may have to avert political collapse with pre-emptive reforms. Never in the history of the Arabs have there been so many popular uprisings which seem to be inspired neither by Islam nor by anti-imperialism but in the quest for liberal reforms. Half a century earlier in Sharpeville and Soweto South Africans experienced their own political awakening.

Research Institutes in the Western world should join the scholarly effort to try and understand both the probable causes and the likely consequences of the most remarkable democratizing political

contagion since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism in Eastern Europe in the final decade of the twentieth century. A projected symposium in Binghamton on "The Pro-Democracy Arab Uprising of 2011" will almost certainly be followed in New York State by further research and by publications, probably in both English and Arabic. But a grand precedent had been set by South Africa -- the last country on the African continent to be liberated but the first to democratize itself credibly.

In recent years political scientists have increasingly examined the hypothesis that mature democracies do not go to war against each other. The question therefore arises whether successful democratization in Southern Africa and the Middle East would reduce the propensity for warfare in these volatile regions of the world in future decades. Political scientists now regard a war between Germany and France, or between Britain and Italy as inconceivable. Would a democratized Middle East become similarly pacified?

In the 1920s and 1930s Mustafa Kemal Ataturk embarked on a long term project of democratizing a Muslim society (post-Ottoman Turkey) *from above*. What the Arab world in the year 2011 is struggling to achieve is the goal of democratizing Muslim societies *from below*. The long-term consequences may be of vital importance

in relations between Israel and the Arabs, between the Muslim world and the United States, and between Islam and Western civilization. South Africa had combined democratization both from below and from above.

Institutes in the Western world are well-placed to participate in the relevant research and scholarship. Such a Western tradition has produced not only authors of relevant books and articles. It has also produced leaders in the Study of Islam and Democracy in the world, Presidents of Associations of Muslim Social Studies worldwide and scholars who have been to almost every Arab country and met some of their leaders. The West had also analysed the lessons of Sharpeville in 1960 and the courage of the youth of Soweto in 1976.

New England's credentials are strong in the effort to promote greater understanding between the United States and the Muslim World in this new phase in Arab history. Initiatives from liberal arts colleges are likely to be an important step forward.

What must not be forgotten are the different roles of women – articulate when the opposition consists of protestors, but more cautious when protestors become rebels.

The story of powerful women in North Africa goes back to Hatshepsut and Cleopatra. In more modern times the range is from

Madame Beheira Ben Mrad of Tunisia in the 20th century to Queen Zewditu of Ethiopia before World War II.

More recently Liberia bestowed upon Africa the electoral credentials of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. And South Africa has produced women-liberators like Winnie Mandela and women-democratizers like the first female speaker of post-apartheid Parliament in Cape Town, Dr. Frene Ginwala.

The struggle continues.