"Enough is Enough!": Youth Protests and Political Change in Africa

Alcinda Honwana

Prelude

I would like to thank the Centre for African Studies at the University of Free State for inviting me to be the keynote speaker on this important occasion. I particularly thank Prof Heidi Hudson and her team for all the arrangements that made my visit possible. I also thank all of you for being here this evening.

Let me start my remarks with a word about the recent attacks against African immigrants, including my fellow Mozambicans, working and living in South Africa. These outrageous acts are totally unacceptable, particularly in a region that shares so much history and prides itself of the tremendous solidarity in our common struggles for independence, racial equality, social justice and political rights. These acts of violence must be strongly condemned.

But as social scientists, we have the obligation to go beyond mere condemnation, and try to understand the underlying causes for this phenomenon. Is this just a result of fierce competition for jobs and livelihoods amongst the poor of the poorest? Are poverty, unemployment and economic hardship the only reasons behind this violence? Could it be that the needs, the aspirations, the suffering and the lives of "others" matter less than our own? Or could this be a disregard or ignorance about our shared history of colonial oppression, racial discrimination and national liberation?

How can we, social scientists, shed light on these critical questions? How can we help decision-makers address this serious threat that undermines the relationship of South Africans with their neighbours, and risks to derail the efforts for peaceful and mutually beneficial regional integration? This is indeed the challenge we face.

Introduction

This evening I would like to focus our attention on the lives of young Africans struggling with unemployment, the difficulty of finding sustainable livelihoods, and the absence of civil liberties. Political instability, bad governance, and failed neo-liberal social and economic policies have exacerbated longstanding societal

problems and diminished young people's ability to support themselves and their families. Many are unable to attain the prerequisites of full adulthood and take their place as fully-fledged members of society. The recent wave of youth protests can best be understood in the context of this generation's struggles for economic, social, and political emancipation.

In this lecture, I will develop three fundamental arguments:

First, young Africans are living in *waithood*, a prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. I found the notion of waithood – to which I will return later - particularly relevant for analysing this stalemate. Youth transitions to adulthood have become so uncertain that a growing number of young men and women must improvise livelihoods and conduct their personal relations outside of dominant economic and familial frameworks. Their predicament is particularly galling, but it also inspires some to devise creative solutions. In recent years the accelerated economic growth raised hope for solving the socioeconomic challenges facing the continent. Yet, there is scepticism among youth that growth alone, without equity, will bring the solution to their problems.

My second argument is that the recent protest movements, led mainly by young people, stem directly from the economic and social pressures they suffer, and from their pervasive political marginalisation. Consequently the young are moving from dispersed and unstructured social and political acts into more organized street protests.

And thirdly, while these social movements have been able to overthrow regimes, systemic transformation takes time and requires more than a mere change in leadership. Major challenges arise in the process of transition as a new political order is being established. Young activists appear to be struggling to translate the political grievances of the protest movement into a broader political agenda. Clearly, they seem to be more united in defining what they don't want and fighting it, and much less so in articulating what they collectively want. The key questions then become: how to play an active role in politics and governance, beyond street protests, and how to create space for a new kind of politics?

This analysis is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with young people in Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia, which resulted in my two most recent books: *The Time of Youth: Work Social Change and Politics in Africa* (published in August 2012 by Kumarian Press in the USA), and *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia* (published in June 2013 by Zed Books in the UK) as well as on more recent developments in the continent. Taking the perspective of the youth involved in these movements, I examine their sense of being 'trapped' in a

prolonged state of youth, and their view that global and national political structures create serious obstacles to real change and new politics.

Let me start with four specific instances:

The protests in Tunisia in 2010/11 were sparked by the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit vendor from Sidi Bouzid who set himself on fire to protest against unemployment and police mistreatment. The protests rapidly spread across the country and thousands of young men and women, from diverse social strata, came into the and thousands of young men and women came into the streets to demand jobs, better living conditions and freedom of expression, ousting of the 23-year dictatorship of President Ben Ali. The Tunisian uprising started what some analysts called "the Arab Spring", and inspired similar activism within the continent, in the Middle East, and more globally. However, after the ousting of the regime, formal party politics superseded the broad base coalition of the street protests and marginalized young activists.

Similarly, in Egypt, young people organized around three major youth movements––the *Kefaya* ("Enough", in Arabic) pro-democracy movement; the April 6 Youth Movement, and the "We are All Khaled Said" movement–– marched to and gathered in Tahrir Square to protest against the regime and successfully ousted President Hosni Mubarak. However, in the post-Mubarak period, established political forces that took control of the political space have sidelined young people.

In Dakar in June 2011, rallying around the movement *Y'en a Marre!* (Enough is enough!), Senegalese youth came out to the streets, clashed with police, and managed to stop the approval of constitutional amendments that would benefit former president Wade. Galvanized by this victory, and using the slogan "*Ma Carte d'Electeur, Mon Arme*" (my voting card, my weapon), the young Senegalese helped to remove Abdoulaye Wade from office in February 2012.

More recently, in October 2014 large numbers of young Burkinabe took to the streets to demand the end of President Blaise Compaoré's 27-year-rule. Campaoré was also working on a constitutional amendment to allow him to run for a third term. However, these young people who spent their entire lives under his rule, were eager for change. Organized through the movements *Ça Suffit* (It's Enough) and *Le Balai Citoyen* (the Citizen's Broom) these young people forced president Compaoré to step down.

These four sets of events in North and West Africa, which successfully overthrew longstanding leaders, are part of a wider wave of protests throughout the continent that has seen large numbers of people, especially the young, taking to

the streets to protest against the status quo. Driven by similar causes, street demonstrations took place in numerous countries including Angola, Cameroon, Djibouti, Gabon, Libya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Swaziland among other places. Although many popular uprisings were brutally repressed and did not result in the fall of governments, it was clear that the tides were turning. While some analysts believed that regime change through peaceful protest wouldn't be possible beyond North Africa—hence the naming of the "Arab Spring" to purposefully divorce those protests from their African location[1]––the cases of Senegal in 2012 and Burkina Faso in 2014 clearly dismiss such claims.

The events in Africa in January 2011 inspired a global movement, for youth protests have mushroomed worldwide since then. Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Turkey faced social unrest caused by youth demonstrations. In Europe, Portugal's young people from the so-called *geração à rasca* (precarious generation) took to the streets to denounce unemployment and the high cost of living;[2] in Spain, the *Indignados* (indignant) movement have been protesting against economic inequalities and the lack of prospects for youth[3]; and the UK also witnessed violent riots by youth from the poorest neighbourhoods (and certainly not only from immigrant communities) following the killing of a young black man[4]. In South America, Chilean students filled the streets of Santiago to demand high quality, low cost public education,[5] while in Brazil thousands of youths organized by the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement) came out to protest inadequate social services, corruption and the

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[1] See Firoze Manji and Sokari Ekine, eds. *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* (Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2012). They argue that these events should be called 'African Awakening' as they first took place in the African continent (Tunisia, Egypt and Lybia). In the same vein, Ali Mazrui (unpub. essay: "Between the Arab Spring and the African Awakening: An Afro-Arab Renaissance," May 2012) suggests that 'Afro-Arab Awakening' more appropriately characterizes the events that started in Tunisia in 2010. He points to the Sudanese popular uprisings against military rule of General Jaafar Numeiri in 1985 as a predecessor to these North African revolutions. See also Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Zed Books – African Arguments, 2015).

[2] See Lusa, "Manifestação da 'geração à rasca' promete juntar milhares," *DN Portugal,* 12 March 2011, http://www.dn.pt/inicio/portugal/interior.aspx?content_id=1804490.

[3] See Anonymous, "Spain's Indignados protest here to stay," *BBC News,* May 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18070246.

[4] See Anonymous, "Getting to the root of the U.K. Riots," *CBC,* August 2011, http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/getting-to-the-root-of-the-u-k-riots-1.1112695.

[5] See Alan Taylor, "Student Protests in Chile," *The Atlantic,* 10 August 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/08/student-protests-in-chile/100125/.

financial scandals surrounding the mega sports projects for the 2013 World Cup.[6] In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement rallied many young Americans to protest against corporate greed and the undue influence of corporations over government.[7] In Asia, Chinese students in Hong Kong launched the Umbrella Movement in September 2014 and began a civil disobedience campaign that occupied and paralyzed major street intersections in the city centre, to demand full universal suffrage for the Chief Executive elections.[8] Beyond the disparities in their material, cultural, and political situations, young people in rich and poor countries are affected by similar problems of unemployment, a sense of exclusion and restricted futures. And they are beginning to assert their rights as citizens, claiming a new space for themselves.

The challenges facing young Africans

What factors make waithood in Africa particularly depressing? Young Africans constitute a disenfranchised majority, largely excluded from major socioeconomic institutions and political processes. Whatever their class background, many youths cannot afford to form families and households and are unable to become fully independent and partake in the privileges and responsibilities of social adulthood.

Liggey, which means work in *Wolof*, the national language of Senegal, is celebrated as an important marker of adulthood. The ability to work and provide for themselves and others defines a person's self-worth and position in the family and in the community. Yet, the majority of young people in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa are unable to attain the sense of dignity embedded in the notion of *liggey.*

In southern Mozambique, in the past, becoming a labour migrant in South Africa constituted a rite of passage into adulthood, as jobs in the South African mines helped young Mozambicans to become husbands, fathers, and providers for their

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6 See Felipe Frazão and Jean-Philip Struck "Passe livre: quem é e para onde vai o movimento que deflagrou uma onda inédita de protestos no país," *Veja,* 21 June 2013, http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/brasil/passe-livre-quem-e-e-para-onde-vai-o-movimento-que-deflagrou-uma-onda-inedita-de-protestos-no-pais.
7 See Brian D. Boydston, "What Exactly Does the Occupy Movement Want?" *The Humanist,* 23 December 2011, http://thehumanist.com/magazine/january-february-2012/features/what-exactly-does-the-occupy-movement-want.
8 See Courtney J. Fung, "Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement ready to open for another storm," *East Asia Forum,* 17 January 2015, http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/01/17/hong-kongs-umbrella-movement-ready-to-open-for-another-storm/.

families and, in turn, allowed young women to become wives, mothers, and homemakers. Today, however, African societies do not offer reliable pathways to adulthood; traditional ways of making this transition have broken down, and new ways of attaining adult status are yet to be developed.

I use the notion of waithood, which means 'waiting for adulthood,' to describe this prolonged period of suspension when young people's access to social adulthood is delayed or denied. While their chronological age may define them as adults, they have not been able to attain the social markers of adulthood: earning a living, being independent, establishing families, providing for their offspring and other relatives, and becoming taxpayers. They are consigned to a liminal space in which they are neither dependent children nor autonomous adults.

Waithood was first used by Dianne Singerman (2007) in her work on youth in the Middle East, as she looked at delayed family formation and the increasing rates of youth unemployment. I found this notion to be very helpful in capturing young people's feeling of being blocked in a stage of prolonged or permanent youth. Waithood also evidences the multifaceted realities of young Africans' difficult transition to adulthood, which goes beyond securing a job and extends to aspects of their social and political life.

Bongani, a 30-year-old man from Soweto in South Africa, has not been able find secure jobs since finishing *matric* (high school diploma) several years ago. He survives on temporary jobs mainly replenishing shelves in supermarkets and retail stores; he is not married but fathered a child, but without a steady and regular income, Bongani is unable to provide adequate child support. Bongani's story is very common across the continent. Ibrahim Abdullah (1998) and Abubakar Momoh (2000) have pointed to the use of the vernacular term *youthman*, in many West African countries, to describe those who are stuck in this liminal position.

Thus, rather than defining youth on the basis of age groups, I understand youth as a socially constructed category defined by societal expectations and responsibilities (Honwana and De Boeck 2005). A 40-year-old who is unemployed and unmarried is still a *youthman*. In contrast, at the age of 10, child soldiers, AIDs orphans, or child labourers assume adult roles, even if many of them are later on pushed back into waithood.

While Singerman's usage of waithood suggests a sense of passivity, my research indicates that young people are not merely waiting, and hoping that their situation will change of its own accord. On the contrary, they are proactively engaged in serious efforts to create new forms of being and interacting with

society. Waithood involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and financial independence; it represents the contradictions of a modernity, in which young people's expectations are simultaneously raised by the new technologies of information and communication that connect them to global cultures, and constrained by the limited prospects and opportunities in their daily lives.

The severity of the impact of waithood on the lives of young Africans depends on each individual's character, abilities, and life skills. But it is also, largely, a function of their family background, level of education and access to resources. Those from the middle class who well connected are better placed to secure jobs and have a smoother trajectory towards adulthood. But the experience of waithood also differs by gender. Men face the pressures of getting a steady job, finding a home, and covering the costs of marriage and family building. Although women are becoming better educated and have always engaged in productive labour alongside household chores, marriage and motherhood are still the most important markers of adulthood. While giving birth may provide girls an entry into adulthood, their ability to attain full adult status often depends on men moving beyond waithood (Calvès et al. 2007).

Coping with waithood

Youth are especially vulnerable to the structural conditions that generate poverty and limit socioeconomic mobility. Declining opportunities in rural areas lead young men and women to migrate to the cities, where their chances of finding employment and stable livelihoods remain very slim. Although growing numbers of young people are completing secondary school and even attending university, the mismatch between educational systems and the labour markets leaves many unemployed or underemployed; they are pushed into the oversaturated informal economy or become informal workers in the formal sector (Chen 2006).

Young Africans have developed their own terms to convey the extemporaneous and precarious nature of their lives. Young Mozambicans use the Portuguese expression *desenrascar a vida*, to eke out a living. Young Senegalese and Tunisians employ the French term *débrouillage*, making do. Young South Africans speak about "just getting by."

The idea of *desenrascar a vida* or *débrouillage* situates the waithood experience in the realm of improvisation, or "making it up as you go along," and entails a conscious effort to assess challenges and possibilities and plot scenarios conducive to the achievement of specific goals (Vigh 2009). These young people operate like Lévi-Strauss's (1962/1966) *bricoleur*, a 'jack-of-all-trades' who manipulates and takes advantage of circumstances whenever possible to attain

his/her own ends. Their actions sound like Michel de Certeau's (1984) tactics, or daily struggles that respond to immediate needs rather than longer-term strategies designed to achieve broader ends (Honwana 2006).

This experience and orientation is shared by young men and women who engage in street vending, cross-border trading and smuggling; those who plan and plot to migrate illegally to South Africa or to Europe; and those who end up in criminal networks as swindlers, traffickers, and gangsters. Young women and men also use their sexuality as a means of gaining a livelihood by engaging in intimate relationships with sugardaddies and sugarmamas for money, gifts, and access to fashionable goods. Indeed, as Christian Groes-Green (2011), Mark Hunter (2010) and others have pointed out, these new types of relationships are replacing previous patterns of intimacy among young people and generating new understandings of masculinity and femininity (Honwana 2012). Some young people become successful entrepreneurs by repairing electronic devices; making and marketing clothing and jewellery; and doing hair and nails. Others are creating new artistic, musical, and performance forms, making graffiti, painting murals, writing blogs, and becoming savvy Internet users.

In this sense, young women and men in waithood develop their own spaces where they subvert authority, bypass the encumbrances created by the state, and fashion new ways of functioning on their own. These youth spaces foster possibilities for creativity; and as Henrietta Moore puts it, for self-stylization, "an obstinate search for a style of existence, [and] a way of being" (Moore 2011: 2). The process of self-styling is made easier by cyber social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Waithood constitutes a twilight zone, or an interstitial space, where the boundaries between legal and illegal, proper and improper, and right and wrong are often blurred. It is precisely at this juncture that young people are forced to make choices. Their decisions help to define their relationships towards work, family, and intimacy, as well as the type of citizens they will become. Rather than being a short interruption in their transition to adulthood, waithood is gradually replacing conventional adulthood itself (Honwana 2012).

Many young people see waithood as stemming from national and global policies that have failed to reduce poverty and to promote equitable and broadly distributed economic growth. According to various political economists, structural adjustment programmes have seriously weakened African states' ability to determine national policies and priorities, and to uphold the social contract with their citizenry (Rogerson 1997; Manji 1998; Potts 2000). Bad governance, corruption, and the absence of fundamental freedoms compound this predicament. Recent accelerated growth rates in the continent bear

considerable promise. However, growth alone, without equity, will not guarantee social inclusion and better lives for the majority of the population. Indeed, young people rebel against the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the rampant corruption that they observe as elites enrich themselves at others' expense.

From non-movements to protest movements

Young Africans today are generally better educated and more closely connected with the rest of the world than their parents. The young people I interviewed did not seem like a 'lost generation' nor did they appear apathetic about what is happening in the societies surrounding them. They are acutely conscious of their marginal structural position, and no longer trust the state's willingness and ability to find solutions to their problems. In their shared marginalisation, young people develop a sense of common identity and a critical consciousness that leads them to challenge the established order (Honwana 2012, 2013).

Like other social groups, youth have always been involved in everyday processes of social change by fashioning the spaces within which they try to get by and assert their rights. Asef Bayat calls these dispersed actions 'non-movements,' which he describes as "quiet and unassuming daily struggles" outside formal institutional channels in which everyday social activities blend with political activism (2010: 5). In Africa, young women and men engage in civil society associations, in popular culture, in debates through cyber social networks, and in political demonstrations. If we pay careful attention to the lyrics of their songs, the verses of their poems, the scripts of their plays, and the discourses propagating in their Facebook pages, blogs, tweets, and SMSs we uncover a strong critique of the status quo.

Striking is that, in the Africanist literature, little attention has been paid to broader debates on social movements, understood as collective groups "acting with some degree of organization and continuity" outside of institutional channels to challenge or defend extant authority (Snow et al. 2007: 11). A reason might be, as various authors have stated, that in Africa forms of non-violent political protest did not conform to dominant Western frameworks that inspired mainstream social movement theory (Wignaraja 1993; Thompson and Tapscott 2010; Bayat 2010). In this regard, more attention should be paid to young people's "quiet daily struggles" outside formal political channels.

Over the past few years, however, young people have moved from this "quiet encroachment" (Bayat 2010: 56) on public space to a more open and vociferous takeover of the national political stage, questioning their waithood status and demanding better lives. By taking to the streets united and braving police, some

have overthrown dictatorships, voted out corrupt leaders, and forced governments to reverse unpopular decisions. In fact, from a vantage point outside dominant ideologies, the younger generations are capable of envisioning society and the polity anew precisely because of what Karl Mannheim (1952) calls "fresh contact," a novel outlook that arises as they assimilate, develop, and alter the social and cultural repository received from previous generations.

Yet, despite their successful protests, young Tunisians, Egyptians, Senegalese and Burkinabe have not seen fundamental changes in their socio-economic conditions; they are disappointed with the new political forces that have taken over, and remain deeply dissatisfied with the direction and slow pace of change. All of them realise that translating a protest movement into an ongoing political presence that can shape public policies at the national level constitutes an immense challenge (Honwana 2013).

Once old regimes fall and the enthusiasm and energy of street protests wane, 'traditional' and more established political forces quickly move in to occupy the institutional vacuum, reverting to 'politics as usual' while making some cosmetic changes. Young activists find themselves more divided; the broad unity forged during street protests dissipates as they struggle to articulate a new common purpose and to define a new political role for themselves. For example, tensions within movements such as *Ça Suffit* in Burkina Fasso have exposed internal divisions and the limitations of the broad horizontal front and raises questions about the future of these movements and their role in the post-protest phase.

Ensconced political forces have proactively blocked youth's political involvement, and this is clearly seen in the banning of the April 6 Youth Movement by the Egyptian regime in 2014 on charges of "distorting Egypt's image". But it is also clear that the horizontal and non-hierarchical structures adopted by these youth movements do not provide them with clear leadership to contend for power and enter the formal political arena. In the aftermath of street protests, young people appear to be retreating back to the periphery of formal politics.

The new 'politics'?

Many young activists denounce old-style party politics and object to being manipulated by politicians, whom they regard as corrupt and self-serving. They consciously distance themselves from partisan politics, refusing to transform their movements into formal parties. For example, the activists of *Y'en a Marre* in Senegal declined to join President Macky Sall's cabinet or to form their own political party. Even those young activists who hold party memberships often complain that their voices are ignored.

Simon Critchley (2011) suggests that the disconnection between youth and current political culture derives from the dissociation of power from politics. "Power is the ability to get things done," "politics is the means to get those things done," and democracy is the system that allows for power to be exercised by the people. Today, the divorce of power from politics is deepening because power is being seized by supranational finance and trade corporations and by transnational organised crime syndicates. Devoid of power, politics remains localised in the nation state and responds to the interests of supranational powers rather than to the will of the people. In this sense, 'sovereignty is outsourced' and democracy becomes a charade, as politics has no power but instead serves power. Critchley reminds us that the separation between politics and power happened, not by chance, but through the connivance of politicians who embraced free market capitalism as the engine for growth and personal gain.

In the same vein, Aditya Nigam points to the current crisis of the 'political' and suggests that in the wake of the North African revolutions, these societies are "living in an interregnum when the old forms of politics have become moribund and obsolete but new ones have not yet emerged … Something, clearly, is waiting to be articulated in this relentless refusal of the political" by the younger generation (2012: 175).

Young people are already developing alternative sites for social and political intervention beyond party politics and within civil society organisations. They establish and engage with movements and associations that involve political action without requiring party membership. They fight for freedom of expression in the real and virtual worlds; they head anti-corruption and open-government campaigns; they work in youth leadership development programs, women's rights, environmentalism and such like. But youth responses are not always constructive as their disappointment with party politics and with their waithood condition may lead also to radicalization and join movements such as ISIL, Al Shabab and Boko Haram; it may also lead some to joining xenophobic networks that carry out violent attacks such as the ones witnessed here in South Africa in 2008 and 2015.

However, will youth civil society associations, as platforms of political action, be enough to help steer meaningful political change? Will it be possible for the younger generation to drive the creation of a new political culture from outside dominant political structures? Will street protests remain young people's main mechanism for exerting pressure on those in power? How does this generation envision the 'new politics'? These are some of the questions that will merit further research and analysis as the wave of youth protests and political

transitions continue to unfold.

Intriguingly, my young interlocutors seem to believe that it is possible to achieve fundamental change outside of dominant political structures, even if they have not yet fully articulated how to do so. In their view, transition processes are not linear; they take time and are full of twists and turns along the way. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the 'waithood generation' is already standing up for itself, and making its mark in the world.

I thank you.

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