

# Protests as a Vehicle for Political Change

Written by Marnix Middelburg

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Protests fueled the 'Glorious Revolution' (1688) in England and the French Revolution (1789) in France, historical events which shattered the existing political regime and paved the way for the creation of a new system (Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012). Protests against the war in Vietnam, the murder of George Floyd (2020), and climate change are recent examples of how organized protests influence the political landscape in the Western world. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the nature, relevance, and impact of popular protests in the West is mirrored in other parts of the world. In (semi)authoritarian societies, protests are the ultimate form of non-violent resistance, as exemplified in Russia (2021), Hong-Kong (2019–2020), and Belarus (2020–present). These protests allow individuals from all layers of society to collectively stand against their government, which has the power to violently disperse these protestors. Individuals have less power to influence the politics of their country in situations like these, due to frequently rigged elections. It is thus reasonable to assume that the nature, relevance, and impact of protests differs according to the environments in which they occur. Scholars and media have devoted a lot of attention to protests in the aforementioned countries, but research shows that Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed a tremendous increase in the amount of protests since 2011 (Mueller, 2018, p. 2).

Therefore, this research explores how protests function as vehicle for political change in Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the impact of social media will be studied, as social media plays an increasingly important role in organizing and sustaining popular protests. The protests in Ethiopia between 2012 and 2018, in which protestors managed to force the resignation of their prime minister, provides a case that aligns with the goal of this essay. These protests enabled Abiy Ahmed to implement radical political changes in Ethiopian society after asserting power as prime minister in 2018.

Thus, the central research question in this paper is the following: *how did the Ethiopian protests allow for a reshuffling of the Ethiopian political landscape?* This paper will argue that protests are a useful tool to unite various groups into an organized collective with the goal of 'breaking open' the existing political system. In that way, protests serve as a 'battering ram' against established regimes which provide political actors a chance to gain power at the cost of incumbent governments. Social media has the potential to enhance the power of protesters by attracting and uniting more people behind a common cause.

However, protests are limited in their functionality as a vehicle for political change as they (1) have no control over the behavior of those individuals that come to power in the wake of protests, and (2) have little agency in the process of constructing a new political system. First, this paper will explain concepts like 'gatekeeper states' and 'competitive authoritarianism' in order to provide the reader with a general understanding of the political landscape across Sub-Saharan Africa. Following will be a more focused, contextual overview of the history of Ethiopia. Subsequently, this paper will focus specifically on the protests of 2012–2018 to explain how they fostered political change in Ethiopia. This section will also discuss the role of social media in the protests. The essay will conclude with a summary that includes the main findings of the research, limitations, and critical remarks.

Researching political phenomena like popular protests across Sub-Saharan Africa requires a proper understanding of the political landscape of these specific countries in the region. The institutional framework of all African states has been significantly impacted by its colonization by Western powers (Cooper, 2019). Colonial powers relied on the cooperation with African elites to sustain their indirect/direct colonial regimes (Parker & Rathbone, 2007, pp.

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100–108). This created a situation in which the colonial regime was well-positioned to oversee matters of the economy, whilst the governance of social and legal affairs was outsourced to local elites. The most lucrative space to occupy in this system was that of the central power, referred to as “gatekeepers”, which allowed control over all trade (Cooper, 2019, chapter 1). The gatekeepers enriched themselves through imposing tax duties on the trade that passed through the ‘gate’ of the African colonies, which simultaneously enabled them to direct resources to those individuals whose support was needed to maintain their position as gatekeepers (Ibid). These individuals were the African elites who were tasked with governing the socio-legal domain of the African colonies. The gatekeepers were thus the richest and most powerful actors, but dependent on cooperation with elites who held power in the periphery of the system. In turn, the central powers were incentivized to construct policies that would satisfy the demands of the elites whose cooperation was necessary in order for them to maintain their position as gatekeepers. The needs and wishes of the general population were largely neglected as a consequence of the gatekeeper states. Western colonial powers in Africa constructed the gatekeeper states, but they continued to exist during and after the decolonization era (Cooper, 2018). African elites who had led their nations in the fight for independence occupied the position of gatekeeper, previously a privilege for colonial powers (Ellis, 2011).

The new gatekeepers continued to enrich themselves and their allies, whilst having little incentive to satisfy the demands of the general population of the newly independent states across Africa. This political system was challenged in the 1990s by a wave of protests that swept across the African continent (Bleck & van de Walle, 2018, pp. 4 – 8). Many authoritarian states in Africa implemented democratic changes due to the pressure of these protests in combination with other internal and external factors (Levitsky & Way, 2020). Consequently, multi-party elections were regularly organized across Sub-Saharan Africa, which allowed the political opposition and citizens to gain increased leverage in domestic politics. This is a clear example of how popular protests can force a change in a system. On the other hand, it also showcases the limitations of the influence of protests regarding the process that follows this change. The multi-party elections did not create an entirely new political system, but were incorporated into the pre-existing political arena of African states (Ibid). Despite this ‘wave of democratization’, authoritarian practices continue to exist in Sub-Saharan Africa. This co-existence of democratic institutions with authoritarian practices is coined as “competitive authoritarianism” (Ibid). In a competitive authoritarian state, multi-party elections are organized in such a manner that it facilitates incumbents to maintain power. They do so by rigging elections, controlling media outlets, intimidating voters, and other practices that make the electoral competition unfair. Incumbents can do so since political influence in many states across Sub-Saharan Africa is heavily centered around the executive power.

The legacy of the gatekeeper states and the rise of competitive authoritarian states has left many people across Sub-Saharan Africa with little influence over the politics of their country. Protests are therefore a useful vehicle for creating political change in Sub-Saharan Africa, since they allow individuals to aggregate their dissatisfaction into a collective that demands a political change. The more individuals from various layers of society demand a change, the more effective a protest can be used as a ‘battering ram’ against the current political regime. Due to the potential of social media to increase the volatility of the status quo, authoritarian governments have stepped up their efforts to regulate these platforms (Stremlau, 2018). The Ethiopian protests between 2012 and 2018 illustrate how social media and popular protests foster radical political change. Before focusing on these events, the essay will provide a contextual overview of the history and political landscape of Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Empire successfully repelled foreign influence and invasion for centuries, but was governed in a decentralized manner which created a similar internal balance-of-power as in gatekeeper states (Vadala, 2011). It was subjugated by the Italians in 1935, but never completely colonized due to sustained local resistance. The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I managed to reclaim control over his empire in 1941 and expelled British foreign influence in 1944 (Ibid). The emperor tightened his grip on important economic and political institutions in the post-WW II era, but the political regime was overthrown by the military junta known as the ‘Derg’ regime with support of popular protests. Subsequently, the Derg regime was militarily defeated by an ethnic federalist political coalition in 1991, known as the EPRDF (Khisa, 2019). The EPRDF consisted of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (Opalo & Smith, 2021). The coalition was spearheaded by Meles Zenawi of the TPLF, which gave the party significant influence in the alliance. The EPRDF aimed to modernize Ethiopia through

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economic and political reforms, such as adopting ethnic federalism as a state model and introducing multi-party elections (Ibid). By doing so, the regime claimed to grant power to individuals and previously underrepresented groups through democratic reforms. The federal system enhanced the agency of various ethnic groups regarding the governance of their local regions. The EPRDF expanded the political inclusiveness of Ethiopian society until the elections of 2005 (Workneh, 2021). Individuals and media were allowed relatively large amounts of freedom in their political opinions. Political opponents of the EPRDF were even allowed to run in a fairer competitive field.

This resulted in significant political gains of the political opponents of the EPRDF in several key constituencies in the 2005 elections (Workneh, 2021). The government refused to accept these results and violently oppressed protests that demanded clarity about the results of the elections, which resulted in the death of around 225 protestors and the imprisonment of thousands of individuals. Consequently, the EPRDF strengthened its grip on media outlets and civil society in order to safeguard the status quo in upcoming elections. The 2010 elections were unsurprisingly won by the EPRDF due to the unfair electoral competition (Gagliardone, Stremlau & Gerawork, 2018). This is a clear example of how Ethiopia's democratic changes were adapted into a system of competitive authoritarianism. Concerns regarding the political and economic situation in Ethiopia continued to exist, and in combination with suppression of nationalist and secessionists movements, set the scene for the protests that occurred between 2012 and 2018 (Ylönen, 2018).

The frequency and intensity of popular protests against governmental authorities increased in Ethiopia since 2012. Ethiopian Muslims protested against governmental interference in religious practices in 2012 and the opposition group, Semyawi Party, demanded the release of political prisoners in 2013 through mass protests (Workneh, 2021). The EPRDF was unable to quell these protests due to a decline in its power, which was a consequence of political infighting within the coalition after the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012. The protests in 2012 and 2013 showed that the EPRDF was vulnerable, but did not significantly challenge the political system since it was supported by a minority of Ethiopian society. However, Ethiopian society witnessed mass uprisings against the government amongst the Oromos and the Amharas between 2014 and 2016 (Opalo & Smith, 2021).

These two groups represent two of the largest ethnic factions within Ethiopia. The direct causes for the protests were attempts by the federal government to expand its power into the territory of the Oromos, in addition to the arrests of important activists and leaders within the Amhara society. An indirect cause for the dissatisfactions of both ethnic groups with the authorities was the long-standing domination of the TPLF over the government. The TPLF represents the Tigrayans, who make up around 6% of the Ethiopian population (Workneh, 2021). The Amharas and Oromos are normally divided in their political goals as Ethiopia is organized as an ethnic federalist state. The almost simultaneous repression of both protests by the government converged the political goals of the two ethnic factions. Social media played a noteworthy role in these political developments between 2014 and 2018. Individuals were able to inform themselves on the state of the protests via *#OROMOPROTESTS* and *#AMHARARESISTANCE* (Giorgis 2018). Moreover, individuals showed their disregard and contempt for the outcome of the 2015 national elections, which resulted in the inauguration of Hailemariam Desalign as prime minister. This disregard further reinforced the perceived necessity of political change through protests by those individuals and groups that felt marginalized by the current political system (Gagliardone, Stremlau & Gerawork, 2018).

The EPRDF thus declared a state of emergency in an attempt to regain control over the country in 2016, which resulted in restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Despite these measures, ethnic violence continued to flare up in 2017, which further enhanced the perception that a reform was necessary (Workneh, 2021). The ADP and the ODP, both representing the ethnic factions that initiated mass protests starting from 2014, identified a chance to gain political power by setting aside their past grievances and posed a unified stance against the prime minister and the TPLF. They were able to do so since the constituencies of both parties demanded a change and were not opposed to the idea of crossing ethnic boundaries to do so. This strategic alliance managed to force Prime Minister Desalign to resign and paved the way for Abiy Ahmed of the ODP to occupy the post of prime minister in 2018.

The successive and sustained Ethiopian protests functioned to gradually weaken the political position of the incumbent government. A weakened government allowed political elites from the OPD and the ADP to cooperatively

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push for a reform within the Ethiopian political system, which started with the inauguration of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister. This cooperation between the OPD and ADP would not have been possible without the sustained protests from their respective constituencies. The political goals of both ethnic factions converged as they targeted their dissatisfaction at the government. Thereby, they provided their respective political elites the political space to transcend the ethno-political boundaries that define the Ethiopian political landscape. The protests thus functioned as the vehicle for political change that simultaneously weakened the government and empowered those elites who sought to change the status quo along the lines of the demands of the protesters. But this is also where the political functionality of protests encounters its limitations. Once the current political system has been opened, protests have little influence in the political game that follows on the creation of a power vacuum.

Ethiopian society seemed an exception with Abiy Ahmed as their new prime minister shortly after his inauguration. He started implementing radical reforms that aligned with the wishes of the protesters. Ahmed normalized relations with Eritrea as to provide Ethiopia with access to trading ports, which would improve the economic situation of Ethiopia (Addis et al, 2020). He released thousands of political prisoners and welcomed exiled journalists, politicians, and activists back to the country in an illustration of how his government would allow for more freedom of expression (Ylönen, 2019). The cabinet was thoroughly reformed as only one ministerial post was appointed to a TPLF politician whilst ten new ministers were appointed (Ibid). The EPRDF was eventually dissolved and reformed into the Prosperity Party (PP), which caused dissatisfaction with the previously powerful TPLF. Ahmed earned the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his actions and policies (Jima, 2021). But protestors have no influence over the occupation of the power vacuum that their protests have created. Protests therefore have the potential to cause more political instability in the future. The situations in Libya and Egypt after the Arab Spring exemplifies this concern. The creation of competitive authoritarian states in reaction to the wave of protests in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s underscores the fact that popular protests are capable of making *a change*, but have little agency in the process of *incorporating that change* into the pre-existing political landscape or *how political actors use that change*. Research also indicates that the use of social media in the wake of the protests reinforced, rather than transcended, ethno-political boundaries (Workneh, 2021). Abiy Ahmed has also received more criticism from various parts of the Ethiopian society, which showcases how little influence the population has over the process that follows after popular protests have caused a change in the leadership of a country's government while leaving its overall structure intact (Jima, 2021).

To conclude, this essay has demonstrated how popular protests function as a vehicle for political change in Sub-Saharan Africa through a study of the Ethiopian protests that occurred between 2012 and 2018. Gatekeeper states and competitive authoritarian states leave little influence and agency for individual citizens in the domestic political arena. Therefore, sustained popular protests function as an aggregation of individual dissatisfaction which weakens the political position of the incumbent government. The protests function as a 'battering ram' against the current political system, thereby providing political opponents with more power and leverage to implement reform or occupy a power vacuum. The role of social media enhances the power of protests since this platform has the potential to unite more supporters behind a cause. Once a change has been made in the wake of popular protests, the protests lose a large part of their political functionality. They have little to no agency over the incorporation of changes into the existing political landscape or how a power vacuum is occupied. It is therefore a useful vehicle for creating a change, but does not provide citizens with a continuous influence over the politics of their country.

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