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Protest, internet activism, and socio-political change in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan Africa has been the scene of a sizeable wave of social and political protests in recent years. These protests have many aspects in common, while at the same time there is a certain historic continuity connecting them to previous protests, with which they also have much in common. What makes them new, however, is a hybrid nature that combines street protest and online action, making them similar to protests occurring in other parts of the world during the same period. Based on a literature review and field work on three countries, Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this article addresses some of the main features of what some authors have called the "third wave of African protests". The study points out how the digital environment is galvanising a new process of popular opposition and enabling both greater autonomy for actors promoting the protests and greater interaction at the regional level. With the socio- political impact in the short and medium term still uncertain, the third wave of African protests is giving birth to a new political and democratic culture in the region as a whole.

Keywords:

Sub-Saharan Africa, social protests, internet activism, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo

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1. Introduction

The international financial crisis that started in 2008 provides the background for a rolling wave of protests that have taken place in many parts of the globe over the last decade. Authors such as Sami Naïr (2011), Manuel Castells (2012), Michael Burawoy (2013), Angel Calle (2013), Joan Subirats (2013), Noam Chomsky (2013), Paul Mason (2013), Slavoj Zizek (2013), and Donatella della Porta (2015) have all discussed the causes and characteristics of these protests and agree on many aspects. In an attempt to systematise and conceptualise these phenomena, some authors have labelled the protests "Revolutions 2.0" (Cocco in Rocha et al. 2013), "Wikirevolutions" (numerous authors), and "interconnected protests" (Mason, 2013), though the term that has prompted most debate is that used by Castells (2015), who described them as "networked social movements." In *Networks of Outrage and Hope,* the author describes them as an "emerging model" of social movement that is characterised by interconnectivity, the occupation of urban spaces, and the viral nature of their activities.

One of the most striking elements of this literature, however, is that it fails to pay attention to the protests that were simultaneously taking place in sub-Saharan Africa. Beyond a passing mention, none of the previously mentioned works analyses in depth the protests that took place in Burkina Faso, Senegal, Kenya, Sudan, Togo, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, to mention only some of the most important. This omission reflects the criticism made by authors such as James Ferguson, who considers that "the entire continent is simply ignored altogether, even in the most ambitious and ostensibly all-encompassing narratives" (2006, p. 26). For Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly (2015), this silence has a clear explanation: it derives from the traditional stereotypes and clichés about the continent that meant that the few African protests that receive international media coverage are dealt with negatively and labelled as "riots", or in other terms which have violent connotations.

What is certain, however, is that alongside the so-called "Arab Springs", which have aroused intense academic and media interest, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a large number of protests, many of which preceded those in North Africa. Alex De Waal

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and Rachel Ibreck (2013) assert that it should not be forgotten that—foreshadowing the type of demands made by the countries of the Arab world—the sub-Saharan region experienced a major wave of protests in the early 1990s, whose principal demands were greater democracy and the holding of elections. The last phase, the "African Spring", was initiated in the mid-2000s and is linked to the global cycle of protests starting in 2011 that was amplified by the momentum generated by the uprisings in North Africa. Several authors (Branch and Mampilly, 2015; De Waal and Ibreck, 2013; Mueller, 2018) have called this new sequence of protests in the sub-Saharan region the "third wave of protests" on the African continent, describing protests that took place before the independence processes in the 1950s as the "first wave," and protests that sought to end the "one-party" regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the "second wave".

The main thesis of this article is that the third wave of protests has some characteristics in common with previous protests and some elements that are new. As before, the main protest leaders are essentially the young, urban, middle-class, whose principal demands are greater democracy and the improvement of socio-economic conditions and opportunities. What is new in Africa, however, is the use of digital tools, which are employed intensively and are absolutely pivotal in all the protests. Despite the digital divide in Africa,[1] internet activism—political action and social participation through the use of digital tools—is key in many of these processes, to the extent that collaborative networks have been created at a continental level, as is seen in the emergence of "Africtivistes". This article explains how the digital environment favours greater autonomy for the actors behind the protests and greater regional interaction.

The methodology employed includes a review of the somewhat limited literature on the phenomenon and twenty unguided interviews conducted over several years with leading figures in social protest movements and African internet activism. The study aims to shed light on the thesis proposed by focusing on protest movements in three countries in particular: Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

1 According to World Internet Users and 2019 Population stats, Africa was the region with the lowest internet penetration rate in 2019, with only 37% of Africans having access to the internet. See: https://internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

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The first part of the article sets out the historical context of the various different African waves of protest and sets out some quantitative and geographical characteristics of the third wave. The second part summarises the main features of the three cases mentioned above. On the basis of the literature studied and the three case studies, the third part describes the main characteristics of the protests and their significant digital dimension. In short, the article tries to systematise some of the main ideas being raised about this unrest, and, above all, by way of conclusion, attempts to show how all these protests—in which the digital environment plays such a key role—are contributing to a new political and democratic culture in many African contexts.

2. Protests and socio-political change in Africa: a brief historical background

The most systematic and thought-provoking analysis of the recent protests in sub-Saharan Africa is doubtless *Africa Uprising. Popular Protest and Political Change* by Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly (2015). Other attempts to explain the current socio-political unrest in the sub-Saharan region include Lisa Mueller's, *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa* (2018) and several special issues published by academic journals. These include the dossier brought out by the *Vienna Journal of African Studies* and edited by Nikolai Brandes and Bettina Engels (2011) and another in the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* edited by Tom Lodge (2013). Of the other background articles and reports, those written by Nick Cheeseman (2015, 2018) are also noteworthy. Almost all of these works highlight the need to recognise that the protests in Sub-Saharan Africa are not a unusual response to specific circumstances, but part of a historical process that goes back to the experiences of resistance during the 300 years of the slave trade and the intensive colonisation process.

The 20th and 21st century protests have led some authors to classify African protests as different stages, or "waves." The following is a brief analysis of some of the features of the first two waves of protests, followed by a presentation of several aspectsof the so-called "third wave".

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2.1. From the anti-colonial struggle to the struggle against the "one-party state"

The 1940s and 1950s brought structural changes both inside and outside Africa. On the international scene, the Second World War greatly weakened the colonialmetropolises and the United Nations General Assembly provided a new forum in which African countries could express their aspirations for political independence. Within Africa, the leaders of the new African political parties, most of whom had been educated in the capitals of the metropolises, championed nationalist projects that sought to overcome internal divisions based on identity and prepare for the new framework of independent states (Freund, 2016).

Within this context, the main strategy employed in the anti-colonial struggle became popular non-violent protest, led by the various nationalist movements in Ghana, Guinea, Malawi, Kenya and Sierra Leone. The strategy was endorsed at the Fifth Pan- African Conference held in Manchester in 1945 and the Declaration adopted proposed "a united front between the intellectuals, workers, and farmers in the struggle against colonialism that would employ 'the strike and the boycott' as 'invincible instruments of decolonization (Branch and Mampilly, 2015, p. 24). Amongst all the leaders at the time,it was the Ghanaian Kwame Nkrumah who most convincingly led a so-called strategy of "Positive Action", which was translated into ongoing peaceful protest right up until independence was achieved for the country then known as the "Gold Coast". This strategy attracted enormous internal support for Nkrumah's party, the Convention People's Party (CPP), which forced the London government to grant Ghana independent status in 1957. Using the same non-violent protest strategy, an initial group of countries (Guinea, Senegal and Ivory Coast, amongst others) gained independence thereafter. But from the early 1960s, armed struggle became the main decolonisation strategy, exemplified by the action of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the liberation struggles in the Portuguese colonies (Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique andCape Verde), and the war in Algeria (O'Toole, 2013).

The continent experienced a certain period of political euphoria after nations had achieved independence: there was a conviction that, after centuries of plunder and

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dependence, Africa was entering a period of development and democratisation. In time, however, most countries embarked on processes of political centralisation, and gradually restricted freedoms, often resulting in the creation of "one party states" (Bayart, 1986; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). This domestic political reality was compounded by the impact of the economic crisis of the 1970s, which led to spiralling debt. The increasingly important role of international financial organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and the context of growing global hegemony of neoliberalism, endorsed by the Washington Consensus in the late 1980s, led to the widespread application of structural adjustment plans, which, among other effects, had serious social consequences for the living conditions of millions of Africans (De Lancey, 2013; Freund, 2016; Mueller, 2018).

This was the background for the "second wave" of protests. From the end of the 1980s, a new international framework brought about by the collapse of the communist bloc, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (a beacon for the region), and the increasing importance of trade unions, student associations, civil society organisations and locally-based NGOs in many African countries led to the exponential growth ofsocial protests throughout the continent. "Popular insurrections," Branch and Mampilly argue, "were not simply in opposition to declining economic conditions (...) they were also a reaction against the violation of the social pact that [postcolonial] developmental African states had made with their populations" (2015, p. 47). Economic demands were thus combined with demands for greater political openness in a regional and global context of major socio-political transformations. This provided a window of opportunity for the emergence of new democratisation processes. Civil society, supported by Western donors who aimed to counterbalance the power of African states, together with the protests of an increasingly urban and predominantly young population, were fundamentalin the process of political change that led to the transformation of practically all single- party regimes into multi-party systems in just five years, between 1989 and 1994 (Cheeseman, 2015; Mueller, 2018; Nugent, 2004).

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2.2. The third wave of protests in Africa

As the new millennium progressed, there were political attempts by some parties in the new multi-party states to hold on to power by means of dubious constitutional reforms, while in the socio-economic sphere countries proved unable to free themselves from the neoliberal policies imposed by donors and were ultimately incapable of improving the living conditions of their populations (Mateos, 2018).

Since 2006, the continent has experienced a third wave of protests, prompted by these contradictions. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which systematically quantifies protest in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of "protests" registered in the continent rose exponentially after 2010 (see Figure 1). Varying in intensity and duration, protests have been on a local or national scale and they have taken a number of different forms. They include protests over the increase in the price of basic foodstuffs and the general deterioration of living conditions (Sudan, Niger, Guinea, Chad, Sierra Leone); movements against the attempt by political leaders to change their constitutions and seek additional mandates (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Burundi,Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Togo, Uganda); social and trade union demonstrations against delays in the payment of salaries (Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana); student protests against increases in university fees (South Africa, Uganda); and outcries against police and institutional abuse (Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, Chad), to cite just a few examples.

Elections, or the prospect of elections, have often prompted the acceleration and intensification of protests, not only because they provide a context in which the population blame their leaders for a lack of accountability or for poor political and social achievements, but because they are the time that parties tend to mobilise their social bases, often on an ethnic basis (Arnould et al, 2016).

The outcomes of these protests have been very different. They encompass changes of government, as we shall see in Senegal and Burkina Faso, the intervention of regional bodies to force the president out of power, as was the case in the Gambia, and situations

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in which the leaders have dug in and even intensified their repression against the demonstrators, as initially in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Figure 1. Protests in sub-Saharan Africa (1997-2019)

Source ACLED (https://acleddata.com/data). Protests and riots between Jan 1, 1997 and March 31, 2019 in sub-Saharan Africa (includes East, West, Central and Southern Africa) Information collated by author.

3. Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of the Congo: three key "third wave" contexts.

The protests in Senegal in 2011 and 2012, Burkina Faso in 2014 and 2015, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 2015 provide an insight into some of the dynamics, characteristics and actors in this third wave of protests. Some of the main features of these movements are described below.

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3.1. Y'en a Marre (YEM) in Senegal

The most common explanation for the genesis of the Senegalese movement *Y'en a Marre* (YEM) ("Fed up" in French) is that it was the regular power cuts that caused the young people to revolt in Dakar in 2011. There were other reasons for the Senegalese protests, however. Veteran activists from very different backgrounds, such as rappers Thiat and Kilifeu[2] and journalists Cheikh Fadel Barro and Alioune Sané all played a role, as did socio-economic factors such as the increase in the price of basic products and the inadequacies of public services. And finally, political factors were also important, such as disaffection with government policies, increased public perception of corruption, and the plummeting prestige of the leaders, above all, the prestige of the president's coterie.[3]

All these elements came together in January 2011, with the official launch of the YEM movement. From then onwards, its promoters and supporters escalated protests by adding their voices to the various different demands. In June 2011, they outflanked conventional organisations, political parties and unions, when, together with other movements, spearheaded demonstrations to defend the Constitution. Protests against reform plans promoted by the then Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade seen as an attempt to cling to power, adopted the slogan "Don't touch my constitution". With the National Assembly under siege, Wade was forced to withdraw his bill at the last minute (Kupper, 2017).

The YEM movement reached its climax in February 2012. On 29 January, the Constitutional Council permitted Wade to stand in presidential elections due to be held a month later. This would have been his third term, despite the fact that he himself had introduced a two-term limit in the Constitution. YEM led a social movement that was convinced that Wade had betrayed the Senegalese people. Calling for "civil disobedience", they urged supporters to occupy public spaces and keep the protest on the boil.[4] The violent response of the police fuelled a month of demonstrations and clashes between citizens and state forces. Although the strategy was not able to prevent Wade

2 Thiat and Kilifeu are the two members of the popular and engaged rap group *Keur Gui*.
3 Interview with Thiat on Feb 21, 2019 in Dakar
4 Strategy recognised on the movement's website: http://yenamarre.sn/presentation/historique/

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from standing in the elections, his defeat at the polls was interpreted as a victory for the movement.

These episodes showcased the public profile of YEM. In the words of Denise Sow,[5] "YEM voiced all the frustrations of certain sectors of society." Sow also explains that people were prompted to go beyond simple criticism and take action in the streetsbecause conventional civil society was not able to provide a valid response.[6] The aim of YEM was to raise public awareness, while the concept of the "Nouveau Type de Sénégalais (NTS)"—a socially aware, responsible and committed citizen—was a prime example of the social transformation that they aimed to achieve. The commitment that YEM advocated was about assuming civic responsibility and making an impact on publicservices and the quality of democracy (Kupper, 2017).

Their tools of choice were music, hip-hop in particular, and social media, because this was where they located the citizens they were trying to reach. "People trust us more than politicians because we keep our word", acknowledges Thiat, one of the rappers from the *Keur Gui* group and a founding member of YEM.[7] Denise Sow has been the person in charge of managing the use of social networks from the early days of the movement and explains that her strategy was to employ Facebook and text messages to achieve a number of objectives: to announce activities and explain programs, to alert citizens about arrests, and to keep in touch with the diaspora.[8]

3.2. Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso

In October 2014, a popular revolt in Burkina Faso forced the resignation of President Blaise Compaoré, who had held power for more than 27 years. Less than a year later, in September 2015, a group of military personnel from Compaoré's inner circle attempted toregain power, apparently to reinstate the deposed president. Again, a key factor in thwarting the military uprising was the response in the streets. The *Balai Citoyen*

5 Denise Sow is one of the founders of Y'en a marre and has been part of the inner circle and has been involved in coordination since the beginning.
6 Interview with Denise Sow on February 18, 2019 in Dakar
7 Interview with Thiat on February 21, 2019 in Dakar
8 Interview with Denise Sow on February 18, 2019 in Dakar

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movement ("Citizen's Broom" in French) is seen as being the main body behind these two protests (Bonnecase, 2015). Its actions were not restricted to these two specific episodes, however, as for the previous two years they had been carrying out campaigns to arouse citizen awareness.

The socio-political climate had deteriorated in previous years. During 2011, Compaoré faced a virulent student strike and unrest in the army. Increases in the price of basic products, persistent youth unemployment, and the perception of corruption and inequality were just some of the main reasons for the protests. The murders of journalists such as Norbert Zongo, which had gone unpunished and were considered to be political, also played a role, as did persistent criticism of the political class that had been in power for more than two decades.

Against this backdrop, two of the most charismatic members of Balai Citoyen (rapper Serge Bambara, known as “Smockey” and reggae singer and broadcaster Karim Sama, known as “Sams'K Le Jah”) initiated a strategy of "subversive" activities, as they themselves acknowledge, to encourage the responsibility of citizens in the construction of a democratic system. Both used their background as artists popular with young people to organise fun events in which they conveyed strong political, non-partisan messages on participation and citizen accountability, social awareness, the fight against corruption, transparency, and participatory democracy.[9]

With his sights set on the 2015 presidential elections, the President announced a review of the constitution in October 2014 in order to eliminate the two-term limit. Several civil society organisations, including Balai Citoyen, launched a two-pronged campaign to oppose the move: civil disobedience and protest against the vote on the billin the National Assembly. The pivotal moment was the vote in the National Assembly on 30 October 2014. The people’s resistance ended with the assembly in flames and riots in the streets of the capital, Ouagadougou, and other cities. The protests forced a negotiation between the demonstrators and the government authorities that led to an unproductive announcement of reforms by Compaoré. The next day, the president left the country in secret and during his escape presented his resignation in a series of tweets.

9 Interview with Serge Bambara (Smockey) and Karim Sama (Sams´K Le Jah), on March 20, 2018, in Barcelona

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The next test of Balai Citoyen's leadership was an attempted coup d'état staged by members of the Presidential Security Regiment (*Régiment de Sécurité Presidentielle* (RSP)) on 16 September 2015, a month before the date chosen for the presidential elections. When it became known that the military were holding the main government officials, there was a spontaneous reaction by citizens who took to the streets. Balai Citoyen used social networks to mobilise its supporters (Wirtz, 2017: 63) and called uponthem to resist and defend the transition to democracy. A so-called "warrior ant" strategy appealed to citizens to block the streets of the capital and to remain united. The citizen mobilisation was only one of the explanations for the failure of the coup (Banégas, 2015).The movement has become an example for Burkinabe civil society and a beacon for a large number of young Africans (Wirtz, 2017), who have revived Thomas Sankara's legendary status as a revolutionary hero.

Balai Citoyen used social networks, principally Facebook, to disseminate its activities and build and bind together a community of supporters. The country's internet activists, in some cases close to the movement, used the networks to give visibility to the processes. Twitter and the hashtag #Lwili, ensured wide coverage of the protests, which transcended the borders of the country. During the events of September 2015, the kidnapping of the members of the government was publicised via Facebook and the radio stations that had suffered physical attacks early on were able to continue their news broadcasts on social media.

3.3. "Lucha" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Since 2012, the *Lucha* movement (acronym of Lutte pour le Changement, "Fight for change" in French) based in Goma has built a movement that focuses on a demand for public services, such as the provision of running water, and the conditions of the unemployed.[10] With a commitment to non-violent direct action, common strategies have included awareness-raising and *salongo* (traditional community work days in Congolese society) (Bangre, 2016). Sit-ins in front of government delegations and international

10 Interview with Micheline Mwendike, one of the founders of Lucha, on November 27, 2015 in Dakar

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institutions have been their main form of protest, often with severe consequences for activists.

In March 2015, a workshop on activism was held in the country's capital, Kinshasa, with the participation of members of the Senegalese *YEM* movement and Burkina Faso's *Balai Citoyen*. The foreign guests appeared alongside representatives of *Lucha* to present a new group, *Filimbi*, which described itself as an association of young people committed to the process of political participation which had its sights set on the 2016 elections.[11] The police and the army burst into the hall and arrested more than forty people (Martinot,2017). After that, Lucha changed its strategy, set up branches in other cities (for several years its actions had been limited to the city of Goma), and stood up to increasing government repression. Its demands changed from being purely social and became predominantly political, moving from demanding running water to demanding free and transparent elections. At the same time, the group's popularity grew and it became the preferred group for social sectors opposed to Kabila.

Campaigns for the release of those detained were a priority for *Lucha*. In the months following the arrests, tension grew and the groups came to be considered illegal organisations in several cities. As December 2016 approached, the authorities modified their strategy and sought a degree of rapprochement. Just three months before the end of the presidential mandate, the detainees were released as a gesture of goodwill. *Lucha* continued to demand scrupulous respect for the Constitution, while campaigns for Kabila's resignation and the organisation of elections continued.

Various different opposition forces came together to force a date for elections, 23 December 2018, two years after the end of the presidential mandate, and oblige Kabila to stand down as a candidate. Social networks played a fundamental role in the expansion of the movement. From March 2015, campaigns such as #FreeFred, #FreeYves and #FreeLucha demanding the release of those arrested ran alongside campaigns demanding elections, for example, #ByeByeKabila and #DeboutCongolais from July 2017. Apart from the campaigns, Lucha has maintained regular ongoing activity in the digital environment and has made its network profiles one of its main tools in the struggle. The

11 Interview with Frank Otete y Floribert Anzuluni, promoters of Filimbi, November 27, 2015, in Dakar

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movement's Twitter profile has over 200,000 followers and 90,000 on Facebook. Bienvenu Matumo, a *Lucha* activist, explains that some decisions are made after consultations with activists via WhatsApp[12] while Fred Bauma reminds us of the difference that still exists between support on the networks and mobilisation in thestreets.[13]

4. Characteristics of the third wave of protests in sub-Saharan Africa

These three case studies and the existing literature on other third wave protests in sub-Saharan Africa reveal two characteristics. There is a certain continuity with respect previous protests, in terms of underlying motivations and the type of political subject involved, and a more innovative aspect: the use of digital of tools.

4.1. Underlying motivations and actors in protests.

The protests in Senegal, Burkina Faso and the DRC, as well as in other places in sub-Saharan Africa, all have their own causes and specific characteristics. All of them,however, seem to be the spontaneous and vaguely expressed effect of social discontent with living conditions (De Waal and Ibreck, 2013) and with the unacceptable political practices of certain African leaders (Arnould et al, 2016).

According to Nic Cheeseman (2018), and as the three case studies have shown, the African protests highlighted the enormous shortcomings of the democratisation processes of the 1990s and represented a call for greater accountability and true democratisation of political institutions and politicians. For Branch and Mampilly (2015, p. 82), while the protests in the first wave all agreed on the demand for independence and those of the second wave agreed on multi-party elections, the third wave expressed dissatisfactionwith the type of democracy that had resulted but did not offer a clear alternative to the dominant political order. Many of these protests emerged in contexts in which the political parties in power had tried to instrumentalise constitutional mechanisms to

12 Interview with Bienvenu Matumo, July 22, 2018, via WhatsApp
13 Interview with Fred Bauma, July 25, 2018, via WhatsApp

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remain in power. This coincides with Boniface Dulani's (2011) description of them as "movements for democracy", which, following the political opening up of the 1990s saw themselves as champions in the fight against certain African leaders' attempts to usurp and personalise power. This aspect, Arnould and other authors argue (2016), is reflected in surveys by Afrobarometer, a pan-African network that measures social and political indicators. Alongside social demands for democracy between 2002 and 2010, there was a widespread perception that current political leaders were incapable of promoting it, andas a result there was a growing feeling of disaffection towards the ruling class.[14]

With regard to the socio-economic dimension of the protests, Lisa Mueller (2018) and other authors have argued that the protests were demanding greater socio-economic redistribution in contexts defined by growing inequalities and major socio-demographic changes (urbanisation processes and populations with large segments of the population between 15 and 35 years of age). As we have seen in one of the case studies, there were also demands to protect precarious public services.

There is no consensus in the literature as to the political subject or subjects behind the mobilisations. The most interesting debate on this issue is between the ideas of Branch and Mampilly (2015) and those of Lisa Mueller (2018). The former favour the concept of "political society" and suggest that the subjects behind the mobilisations are informal groupings of young people from the underclass. For these two authors, rather than emerging only from the economic precariat, the protests emerge from groups that experience precariousness in numerous aspects of their lives, not only as a result of economic insecurity, but also from their condition of social and political vulnerability. This they call the "political society" (2015, p. 205). For Mueller, on the other hand, it is a middle class of educated young people who live in the urban environment that have led the mobilisations and have ended up establishing alliances with the most rootless sectors of their respective societies. What the protests in the three contexts analysed enable us to observe is that it is groups such as journalists, musicians and internet activists who were initially able to organise the protest and then brought in other traditional groups, such as unions and student associations.

14 See http://afrobarometer.org/

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One of the aspects that has aroused the most debate is the predominantly urban nature of the protests, with apparently little time given to the rural sphere in the analysis of protests by the various different authors. This division between urban and rural spaces is one of the divisions caused by colonisation as a way to control and regulate colonial territories. This has become more extreme as a result of intense urbanisation processes that are causing migration from the country to the cities. As cities are reshaped, inequalities are growing, and social conflict seems to be a constituent part of the new reality. In the three cases analysed, however, and particularly in the DRC, the rural realityand smaller towns have also been important in the protests.

In terms of motivation and actors, there are clear similarities with the two previous waves of protest, although the third wave has its own unique features, such as the mobilizing role of hip hop. In the two previous waves, it was urban young people belonging to trade unions, women's organisations and student associations who were the main groups behind protests that later acquired an intergenerational character and national reach. This has also happened in the current wave. Likewise, what underlies many of the social demands of all three waves is the desire for a more democratic society and improvements in living conditions.

4.2.Protests and the digital environment: a new space for autonomy and regional cooperation?

There are also some similarities in the third wave with the ways in which the protests have been organised in previous waves. Especially significant are the strategiesof non-violent action and civil disobedience that have guided the protests in many areas. Likewise, strategies such as the occupation of public space and even the siege of government institutions have revealed an attempt to challenge the ruling class and its efforts to instrumentalise political institutions—as has occurred in other places around theworld. Similarly, the literature on past protests reveals demonstrators' appeals to greater civic commitment and to improving a sense of citizenship and political participation. Thisaspect is particularly evident in the three cases analysed, with the three movements

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making explicit calls to participate in the new political culture and appealing to a new type of social conscience.

The major innovation, however, also present in other contexts around the world, is the consolidation of a hybrid space that combines mobilisation in the streets and organisation by means of social networks. This is due to the intensive use of digital media and to the increasingly important role of internet activists in many of the African contexts, particularly in the three cases analysed.

Authors such as Lodge (2013), De Waal and Ibreck (2013), and Mueller (2018), have placed special emphasis on the impact that the use of digital tools has made in sub- Saharan Africa in all these processes. The level of interconnectivity in African protests represents a structural change in the way protests are articulated and in the balance of power between rulers and citizens. Power has traditionally been on the side of the former,especially if one takes into account the attempts by many African leaders to suppress protests by restricting access to the internet, as happened, for example, in the DRC. This "space of autonomy", to adopt the idea of Manuel Castells (2015), offers a new platform that enables the participation and mobilisation of all these young people, essentially thosein cities, who have precipitated many of the protests studied to date. These forms of participation are much more familiar to them and employ tools that they not only master, but also identify with; this gives them, at least in this environment, a leading role. The use of social networks is systematically complemented by a call for demonstrations and protests aimed at occupying urban spaces, which are then also supported by people not directly involved in the debates and discussions taking place online. The aim of the protests is to hold power to account, a power viewed as disconnected from the grassroots that are disaffected with the government and institutions.

The Senegalese internet activist Cheikh Fall describes the protests in countries like Senegal as "soft revolutions", deep but peaceful reforms that shun violence and are committed to responsible and informed citizen participation achieved by means of a systematic use of web 2.0 tools.[15] Most online communities are led by groups ofbloggers and the most immediate aim of most of the tools is to facilitate citizen access to

[15] Interview with Cheikh Fall, March 7, 2012, in Dakar

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the most reliable information. All seek to ensure that the groups involved play their part in gathering information and that the social process results from the pooling of their knowledge.[16] The history of these movements shows that the initiatives do not always achieve their objectives; their success, however, cannot be measured on the basis of having achieved specific objectives, but rather by having opened up new channels for social and political participation and having given birth to a new democratic culture.

Social media has emerged as a fundamental part of the phenomenon, in a situation in which both activists and the target audience are virtually all digital natives (Wirtz, 2017). Social media helps to raise awareness and spread the message, enables activists to communicate easily, promotes cohesion among members, and generates a responsive culture. Besides their own unique strategies, the three movements mentioned above all benefited from the collaboration of militants and sympathisers who were at ease in the digital environment.

A final aspect that should be highlighted is the regional, "to some extent pan-African" dynamic that the digital environment has lent these protests. Alongside the emergence of the above-mentioned movements, vibrant communities of pure internet activists—activists who focus almost exclusively on the use of digital tools for social transformation—have emerged in most African countries (Castel and Bajo Erro, 2013). The links between local communities, strengthened through international participation in campaigns, were made even stronger by the formation of an alliance that crystallised in 2014 in the creation of a digital platform. It was called *Africtivistes* and, at the time, it was initially just an online reference tool.[17] The alliance was institutionalised in November 2015, when *Africtivistes* was founded as an organisation. Activists from 25 African countries came together in Dakar to lay the foundation for its future activity.[18] The second meeting of this pan-African "league of activists" took place in June 2018 in Ouagadougou. The pan-African strategy involves a solid network of groups that aim to advance digital citizenship in their own countries and improve democracy (Dabo, 2018). Insofar as common interests have been established, links between groups are activated

[16] Interviews with Fodé Sanikayi Kouyaté, then president of the Guinean bloggers' collective Ablogui, on August 4, 2015 via Skype and on November 26, 2015, in Dakar

17 Interview with Cheikh Fall, November 28, 2015, in Dakar

18 Attendance at first general assembly of Africtivistes between November 26 and 28, 2015 in Dakar

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rapidly in the event of a threat or if one of the members asks for the help of the rest to publicise a cause.[19]

5. Conclusions and perspectives

This article has raised three main issues. First, light has been shed upon the historical continuity of the protests that have brought about social change across the African continent. In spite of a degree of invisibility, protests have been central in at leastthree processes of social and political change in recent decades: in independence movements, in the establishment of democratic systems, and in the last phase, in protests against the socio-economic conditions of the majority of the population.

Second, attention has been drawn to the central role of the digital environment in the most recent movements and protests. The hybrid space linking street and online networks has provided protest movements with greater autonomy. While they are not entirely free from repression or control by political authorities, they are more capable of generating new dynamics and spaces in which protest can take place. The work of Africtivistes represents a new form of online pan-Africanism and demonstrates the fundamental role that online activism is having in coordinating protests.

Finally, and by way of conclusion, many authors have tried to gain an idea of the perspectives that this type of mobilisation may open up in the short, medium and long term. While for the more pessimistic voices, the third wave of democratisation may end up being coopted by African politics, a victim to neo-patrimonialism and cronyism (De Waal and Ibreck, 2013), others consider that in essence we may be witnessing a long- term process of democratisation whose results, rather than being visible in the short term (regime changes, electoral victories by parties or forces supported by the demonstrators, changes in economic policies, etc.), should be understood as processes that are making a major contribution to re-politicizing the collective social and political imagination and ushering in a new political and democratic culture. This more optimistic view of the

19 Interviews with members of different local internet activist communities, such as the Gambian Saliou Tall, the Senegambian Aisha Dabó, the Burkinabe Chantal Naré, the Cameroonians Anne Marie Befoune and Florian Ngimbis, the Chadian Salim Azim Assani and the Togolese Maxime Domegni and Aphtal Cissé, amongst others, on June 22 and 23, 2018, in Ouagadougou

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present and future of the protests is in line with the vision of the late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake (1995, p. 135), who asserted that the pressures for democratisation have historically been so overwhelming among the majority of Africans that one should not ask oneself "*if* there would be real transitions to democracy but rather *when* they would take place".

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