

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Technology no doubt is the engine that drives the modern world, both for destruction and good; and one of the wonders of modern technology is the computer and the allied internet. Modern communication network now relies on the internet using the computer and mobile telephones. In fact, there is no place to hide with the internet and the handy smart phones with which calls are made and pictures and videos recorded and transmitted across boundaries and continents. The advancements in the computer and internet systems in the last decade of the 20th century produced radical changes in both internet connectivity and features available to users through which people are linked across the globe. The three most basic of these internet features that have radically shaped modern communication are, Facebook, Twitters, and the U-Tube, among others. The three are the most popular and core elements of the social media compartment of our modern internet system. Computer technology has broken the boundaries of closed societies and systems, making actions and activities in such systems open and available to the wider world. Through the internet and its core elements, repressive regimes have been exposed and activities going on in liberal societies are shared. Interestingly, Africa became the starting point for the agitation for political change, which was bolstered by the social media. The so-called “Arab Spring”, which first started in Africa through expositions of social media, saw the dismantling of three despotic and ruthless regimes in Arab North Africa, thus giving vent to agitations for an end to dictatorship and illiberality in other Arab states. The paper will examine the role of the social media in political transformation and change of dictatorial regimes in Africa and the consequences such would have on the overall political template of Africa.

Keywords: social media, political change, 21st century, Africa, experience.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Africa has been a very long one; first as a place where man originated, and second as the precursor to all other forms of civilizations the world has ever known. It indeed has an intriguing past, a confusing present and an uncertain future. Pre-colonial Africa

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was as varied as the continent itself. Different circumstances produced different societies with different traditions, customs and politics, and these societies rose, fell and adapted as the centuries passed. The political system in pre-colonial Africa can be divided into two broad categories – states and stateless societies (Thomson 2004: 8). Africa like other nations of the world did not evolve in isolation prior to European colonization. The continent like other parts of the world had to adapt to invasions and imperial rule in the course of history. Just as Britain experienced eras of domination by Norman occupation, North Africa played host to Persian, Greek, Roman and Ottoman empires over time, and finally Arab domination. Africa was also subject to religious influences – Islam spread across the North, reaching the Atlantic Ocean in the first years of the eight century, while Christianity had gained a permanent foothold in Ethiopia in the fourth century. Further south, the Sahara Desert limited cultural exchanges between the rests of the world and tropical Africa, but Sub-Saharan Africans, by the fifteenth century, had built strong land and maritime trading links with both Arabs and Europeans (Thomson 2004: 11). However, by the beginning of the 19th century, African states and empires began to lose their autonomy to the various states of Europe involved in imperial expansion in Africa. The high point of this European thrust into Africa was the formal partitioning of Africa in November 1884 in what was known as Berlin West African Conference (Asiwaju 1984: 1). The consequence of this conference was the splitting of African groups across boundaries controlled by different European states, and the imposition of alien rule on the peoples of the continent.

The colonial era in Africa varied from one state to the other, but its impact on the continent is considerable, and ranged from the incorporation of Africa into the international modern state system; the imposition of arbitrary boundaries, the reinforcement of non-hegemonic state; the weak link between state and civil society; the promotion of an African state elite; absence of strong political institutions; breeding of animosity; violent inter-ethnic competition and struggle among others. But by the 1950s, African states began to assert their independence and on democratic format fashioned on multi-party system, while some states engaged their colonial overlords in

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armed struggle before independence was achieved, and these states are Algeria, Kenya, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia. However soon after they gained independence, many countries in Africa rejected the political and economic systems they had inherited. Several of the post-independence leaders argued against multi-party democracy, insisting that it presented an opportunity for the politicization of ethnic, religious and other social cleavages (Decalo 1992: 3-10). Progressively African states, who had won their independence on multi-party democratic elections, began to slide into autocracy and one-party states. Also from 1956 to 2001, only three nations (Botswana, Cape Verde, and Mauritius) did not experience any coups or coup attempts. Overall, 30 African nations experienced 80 successful coups; all of the states, except for the Seychelles Island, also faced failed coup and plots. Interestingly, 89 per cent of African coup attempts during this period targeted military regime that had themselves staged successful coups earlier (Collier 2004: 82). Patrick McGowan's study shows that coup in Africa occurred as frequently in the 1990s, – purportedly the decade of democratisation and that the only encouraging sign is their declining success rate, which fell from a peak of 74 per cent between 1966 and 1970 to 38 per cent in 1996-2001 (Collier 2004: 83).

The sudden slid into dictatorship and one person/party rule in Africa after independence was a worrying phenomenon, and may, without impropriety, be described as “the second colonisation of Africa, albeit by a group of its own indigenes” (Nwabueze 1993: 60). The result of this one-party rule in Africa was the gravitation of seat-tight apatite of political office holders; with the concomitant effect that by the middle of 1992, 42 out of the 53 independent African countries then were or had at one time or the other been, under one-party rule, either *de jure or de facto* (Nwabueze 1993: 79). These one-party states were less democratic with no form of opposition tolerated. Its other feature was that it operated on a clique basis where power and privileges are distributed within a social circle of the ruling ethnic group and their allies alone. Thus the political space became narrow, and this situation promoted the gestation of revolutionary sentiments within the marginalized groups. According to Tocqueville, “when tyranny is

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established in the bosom of a small state, it is more galling than elsewhere, because, acting in a narrower circle, everything in that circle is affected by it” (Tocqueville 1956: 81). The most intriguing of the 21st century uprisings in Africa, appeared to have come from the “Arabized” north, where military leaders transmuted themselves into civilian presidents under the worst forms of militarized dictatorships. With the level of praetorian dictatorship in these states, the feasibility of mass and popular uprisings targeted at democratising the political space, were doubted not until the spring of 2011, when it began in Tunisia. The paper intends to show how communication technology opened up closed states and enlightened their oppressed people to demand change and democracy. It will also examine the role of social media in activating and sustaining the “Arab spring” in North Africa from its start till the fall of the three despotic regimes in the region.

AFRICA AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Post-independence Africa has been bedevilled with numerous problems; a central one being that of governance. The post-colonial state in Africa was not radically different from the colonial state. This is so because it is basically a structure of control preoccupied with the maintenance of law and order than with provision of the basic enablement for the advancement of the citizens. Contrary to the expectations of Africans that independence would bring stability and development to the continent; such expectations became quickly dashed. Post-colonial Africa is characterised by the “coexistence of absolute power and administrative decay, or by the dialectic of power and fragility” (Clapham 1985: 39-44). The understanding of power by the political elites of emergent African states became distorted and confusing; power was conceived not as a medium to serve, but as an opportunity to indulge in primitive accumulation of wealth in the interest of its ruling class. Accordingly, the state became a major prize, the key object of intra-class fractional struggles; state power is a zero-sum game and being in or out has serious consequences for one’s wellbeing

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as well as life itself (Ntalaja 1986: 15-16). African states in the post-colonial order became neocolonial states, where stable political order is one that is best captured by the slogan “one country, one leader”. Opposition parties and free elections are opposed because they present real possibilities of political action by the masses, and it is these possibilities that the leaders of the neocolonial African states struggled to suppress. Free from public accountability and popular political control, and in a unique pattern of accumulation known as “pillaging imperialism”, which benefits them and metropolitan capital (Verhaegen 1985: 71-80). The interest of the post-colonial rulers was to maintain their hold on power at all costs, irrespective of the possibilities of a backlash, and in doing this; a conscious process of depoliticising the political terrain inherited from their colonial forebears was conceived. Ake has identified three core elements that supported depoliticisation in post-colonial African states. These elements are political authoritarianism, exclusiveness of claims to rulership (in this regard, politics is practiced with the intent of ending politics; that is to gain power and use it to bar all other claims to power and even rights) and, finally, the radicalisation of politics, where opposition was adjudged unnecessary, while the political structure became more monolithic (Ihomvbere 1992: 54-55).

The tendency for illiberalism engulfed much of Africa from the 1960s. Thus nationalist leaders having seen the perquisites of state power did not wish to leave office or function in a multi-party basis allowing for free and fair elections in their realms. This was the case of Algeria under Ben Bella who inherited a crisis ridden independent state and proved too autocratic and ruthless to the comparison of the departed French. He ruthlessly suppressed all opposition from 1961 until 1965, when his government was overthrown by a military coup (Sagay and Wilson 1975: 336-337). The same fate befell Tunisia, under Habib Bourguiba, who later became the president in 1956, and served in a dual capacity of President and Prime Minister when that country's Assembly voted to end the monarchy and declared Tunisia a Republic in 1957. He remained the sole ruler of Tunisia till 1987, when he was declared medically unfit to remain in power. In order not to allow Tunisia fall into chaos, a shady transition was arranged by

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Italian secret service the SISMI; thus paving the way for the emergence of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in that year. Progressively, Ben Ali relapsed into dictatorship, and distorted the political process so much so that he continued to get re-elected into the presidency even for the fifth time in 2009. His inability to play along democratic format, guarantee human rights, improve the economy, and create jobs worsened the already brewing tension in Tunisia, leading to the popular “Arab Spring” that toppled his government.

The strain of dictatorship and absolutism appear to be a common denominator in Africa’s post-independence politics. In Egypt, the monarch King Faruq was toppled by the revolutionary force within the Egyptian army under General Mohammed Neguib on July 23, 1952, thus setting the pace for military coup for ambitious officers in many African armies. Gamal Abdel Nasser was a popular actor in the entire revolutionary process, and consequently replaced General Neguib in 1954. Nasser’s popularity in both Egypt and the Arab world continued to soar high until the 1967 Arab-Israeli war which saw the crushing defeat of the Arabs and a catastrophic humiliation of Egypt and Nasser’s ambition in the Arab world. He continued to rule till his death in 1970 (Sagay and Wilson 1975: 322-323). General Anwa Sadat, succeeded Nasser, and continued to rule till his assassination in 1981 by the Jihadist cell for making peace with Israel. Thereafter, the mantle of military leadership fell on Hosni Mubarak, an Air Chief Marshal in the Egyptian Air Force and Nasser’s vice president. He continued to rule Egypt as a private estate until the uprising of 2011 that toppled him. The Libyan scenario, presents another curious case of illiberalism. First a monarchy under King Muhammad Idris, who after a long and bitter rivalry with many entrenched interests in the diverse provinces of Libya, managed to empanel the polity as a federal monarchy in 1951. The problem of legitimacy however continued till 1969, when the king was overthrown in a military coup by Colonel Muammar Al-Gaddafi. Gaddafi’s rule was the most oppressive the citizens of that country ever witnessed in their post-independence history. It was a regime of terror that dismantled and distorted all the political institutions of governance and imposed a maximum dictatorship and family rule on the people of Libya for for-

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ty-two years. In line with Hegelian aphorism, the Libyan people “moved forward in a leap, transcending its previous shape, and took on a new one, and everything, dissolved and collapsed like a dream picture” (Hegel 1936: 352). The popular will of the Libyan people dismantled his discredited regime through violent armed struggle in October 2011.

The same illiberal and anti-democratic trend was evident in Ethiopia under the feudal and dictatorial regime of Emperor Haile Selassie, and Ethiopians were unlucky for he was replaced by a worst tyrant and butcher – Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam in a 1975 military coup, which ravaged any hopes of democracy with its Marxian inclinations. The Mengistu dictatorship lasted till it was overthrown through a coalition of rebel forces in 1991. The republic of Sudan is also another sorry state. After her independence in 1956, her ethnic and identity problems pitched the Arabized North against the black south, and in 1958, a military coup toppled the fractured civilian and independence administration. Series of coups took place in Sudan, and the current military general turned president Omar Al, Bashir has been there since 1989. Political participation is constricted in Sudan, and the ruling party has completely stifled the opposition. In the Congo, turned Zaire, the Belgian colonial administration, systematically left it in ruins that by the time independence was achieved in 1960, it became a scene for revolution and counter revolution, ending with the CIA’s conspiratorial murder of that country’s Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and the liquidation of anti-imperialist movement in that country. The consequence of this fatal event was the emergence of counter-revolutionary Mobutu Sese Seko through a military coup in 1965. He became a surrogate of the imperialist west, and an anti-revolutionary agent against sister African states like Central and Southern Africa. He intervened on the side of the imperialist forces in Angola, Burundi, Chad, and Central African Republic (Ntalaja 1986: 8). Mobutu continued to rule as a dictator, till the popular revolution of Laurent Kabila, chased him out of office in 1997. Congo unfortunately today, is Africa’s sorry sight. A look at Uganda shows that she won her independence in 1962, with Milton Obote as the Prime Minister. Obote was autocratic and did not spare time in destroying his

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opponents and eventually declared Uganda a one-party state in 1970. It was at this stage that Idi Amin seized power in a military coup in that country. His regime was a dictatorship that knew no bounds, whose murderous eight-year reign was supported by the likes of Mobutu (Alaux 1979: 13). The removal of Amin did not save Uganda from deadly internecine wars, and the military dictatorship of Yawori Musaveni, who has completely privatized the Ugandan state into a Musaveni state. The taught of free elections in Uganda is far from real, and the western powers are behind him.

The situation in the former Central African Federation was not different from the rest of Africa. Here, the federating states had to break up under the pressure of their various nationalist leaders, and won their independence at different times under trying circumstances. Nyasaland (later Malawi), was the first to have gained independence from the British, under the Prime Ministership of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda on July 6, 1964. In 1966, Banda introduced a new constitution abolishing multi-party system, and consolidated all powers on himself as the executive president, a position he held from 1971 till he lost the first multi-party general elections in 1994 (Meinhardt and Patel 2003: 3). It was the coalition of opposition parties and democratic forces that defeated him in the election. Zambia under Kenneth Kaunda gained her independence, also in difficult situation in October 1964 (Wilson 1980: 310-312) He appropriated political power and eroded democratic principles like his contemporaries elsewhere in Africa, and ran a one-party state where it was expressly provided in the constitution that “nothing therein contained shall be construed as to entitle any person [...] to express opinion or to do any other thing in sympathy with a political party other than the one recognized party” (Nwabueze 1993: 83). The last in the former Central African Federation to gain independence is Zimbabwe. After a protracted struggle with minority rule of white settlers under Ian Smith’s Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI), Zimbabwe eventually wrestled her independence from the British and Ian Smith in 1979. Since then, President Robert Mugabe turned the country into a one party state. Human rights have been suppressed whilst some of the colonial laws were refurbished and applied with ferocity. Many oppo-

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sition figures have either been jailed or driven to exile. The mismanagement of the economy has led to unemployment, poverty, deprivation and general dislocation, which have virtually brought the country to her knees (Falana 2012). Mugabe has remained in power, frustrating every move towards democratic transition in Zimbabwe.

Many other countries in Africa followed the same pattern of democratic and political regression shortly after their independence. In Central African Republic for example, a self-styled emperor emerged in the person of Jean-Bedel Bokassa. His name became synonymous to tyranny as he systematically destroyed every democratic structure in that state and assumed maximum powers. He bankrupted Central Africa with his coronation ceremony which gulped a whopping \$20 million then. His oppressive rule came to an end through a mass uprising in the 1980s. In Kenya, her independence was tortuous and eventually came in 1963, with Jomo Kenyatta as the Prime Minister and later president. He became autocratic and in 1965, declared Kenya a one-party state using every medium coercion including powers of preventive detention and other repressive means (Nwabueze 1974: 215-229). His successor Arap Moi, continued the repressive policies of Jomo Kenyatta, and was forced to renounce one-party rule, which led to his party losing election to an opposition coalition in the early 1990s. West Africa witnessed series of one-party dictatorial post-independence states. Beginning with Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure of Guinea, Senegal under Leopold Senghor and Ivory Coast under Houphouet-Boigny. These leaders saw themselves as all-knowing, saddled with the task of thinking for millions of their fellow country men (Wuam 2009: 527). In other states of West Africa, where the legitimate independence regimes had been overthrown through a military coup, the coupists also dismantled the democratic processes and entrenched themselves in power as maximum dictators. Such places include Gabon under Omer Bongo, Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, and Mathew Kerekou of Benin Republic. All of these states were one-party states and their military rulers had stood for elections and elected themselves in as presidents. Mathew Kerekou as military ruler from February 1972 to February 1980, and February 6 1980 to March 1990 as civilian ruler under one-party system (Nwabueze

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1993: 41). Interestingly, among the African states enmeshed by one-party dictatorship, the Republic of Benin appeared to be the first in setting the pace for democratisation by revolution, through mass protest which eventually yielded a “national conference” involving all stake holders in the polity. It was this conference that assumed the supreme power of the people and eventually appointed a Prime Minister while Kerekou became transitional president. It was the Prime Minister Nicophore Soglo that eventually defeated Kerekou in the 1991 presidential elections, thus ending the regime of that seat-tight dictator and opening Benin up for democratisation (Uwaechue 1991: 540-545).

The leadership deficits of post-independence Africa account for the present democratic predicament of the continent; making Africa the least progressive of all the continents in the world. The military cadre capitalized on this unfortunate phenomenon to stage coups at random and to dig in as seat-tight rulers. Ironically, some African leaders sought to justify the seat-tight syndrome through published treatises, arguing that it was suitable to the socio-economic and political realities of the period (Nyerere 1969; Keita 1960; Yahmed 1964). This tendency to monopolise state power and the attendant benefits became the root cause for agitation for regime change and democratisation in Africa and indeed elsewhere in the world. Their dislike for multi-party politics cannot be supported by common sense. Thus Siaka Stevens, former Sierra Leone head of state argued that multi-partyism “is a system of institutionalised tribal and ethnic quinquennial warfare euphemistically known as elections (which) contributes to an open invitation to anarchy and disunity” (Decalo 1992: 7-35). Over the years, massive state control in most African countries encouraged and advanced nepotism, bureaucratic and political corruption, and this constrained the development of viable and sustainable economic and governmental systems, with the consequence that when the decade of the 1990s began, Africa was still the poorest and least developed continent in the world. Despite massive flows of development assistance, the standard of living of most Africans has either declined since the 1960s or has improved only marginally (Mbaku 1994: 149-155). Poverty is probably the most acute in Africa; the reason

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being that it can lead to hunger, disease, and death and of course violence. With respect to hunger, 15 out of 16 of the “hungriest nations” in the world are in Africa. According to the UNDP’s “low human development” 2009 rankings, only 2 out of 24 of the countries with lowest rankings were not in sub-Saharan Africa (Stahl 2010: 2). Of all the continents in the world, Africa has the largest number of on-going conflicts and wars. The wind of democratisation in the 1990s did not do much in Africa, and that is why life presidents and dynastic regimes are still found in the continent. These are the draw backs to Africa’s prospects for development and growth. The struggle for inclusive government and multi-party democracy in Africa has begun and will not stop till the last dictator is chased out of office. This long narrative on Africa’s leadership and democratic challenges is necessary because it was this age-long political and institutional decay that served as a spring-board for the 21st century mass uprisings that began in north Africa the subject of this paper.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND 21ST CENTURY POLITICAL AGITATIONS IN AFRICA

Technology is the engine driving the modern world, without which man would not have been able to challenge nature, conquer his environment and make extraordinary exploits. In the 21st century, technology has become pervasive, entrapping every aspect of man’s existence; the era has indeed come to what Zhigniew Brzezinski called the “technetronic age” (Toffler 1980: 23). There is nowhere to hide in the world now, the satellites have no barrier with their GPRS systems; wars are fought increasingly with more ferocious precision weaponry hitting targets directly and minimizing the rate of casualties. Indeed, the world is globalized and technology is the anchor point of that success. Not only has the flattening of the world made it possible for movement and communication, it has also, made it possible for closed societies to be seen from far through satellite imageries, and the computer networks, as services are delivered over long distances electronically with little or no degradation of quality (Friedman 2006: 279).

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Computer technology has reduced distance from one continent to another by less than a minute through the World Wide Web and its allied social media networks. Toffler predicted in the 1980s, that the emerging “info-sphere will make possible interactive electronic contact with others instantly from anywhere” (Toffler: 1980: 383). The 21st century brought in its wake the radicalization of the information super high way, opening up outlets that are unique in their own way for the dissemination of information through the internet connectivity. It is through “The Wired Society”, a term coined by James Martin in 1978, to indicate a society that is connected by mass- and telecommunication networks, and the “Network society” coined by Jan Van Dijk as a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks, gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face-to-face communication (Ihejirika 2011: 8) that people in “closed” societies began to see the other side of the coin out side, and progressively began to agitate for change.

The internet is the single most attractive technological innovation to young men and women all over the world; using their smart phones, they browse, chat, send messages, pictures and videos on YouTube, and other social platforms. Through the internet connectivity, contacts are maintained on a more regular basis than any other medium, and this has greatly enhanced the dissemination of information across the globe on practically any situation any where in the world. The world is increasingly changing and citizens of “closed” societies are spurred by the power vested on them as a people and makers of the government, to assert their rights from despotic leaders and even dismantle such regimes by protest and if need be, violence. The social media, has proved effective in the dissemination of information on human sufferings in despotic and illiberal regimes notwithstanding its inherent short comings associated with it as a technological platform; we are now going to see some of the components of the social media to enable us understand its dynamics within the information super high way.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is a term that describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives. Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites also use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact. A few prominent examples of social media applications are: Wikipedia (reference), Myspace (social network), Gather.com (social networking), YouTube (video sharing), Second life (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and Miniclip (games sharing) (Boyd and Narain 2012). This is by no means the only social media outlets; there are others like LinkedIn, which is a social network for professionals, and Facebook (a social network for everyone). There is also Tagged, Badoo, Hi5, Twitter, and Plurk (the last two are the two most popular microblogging services, and allow for only 140 characters per post, and each lets the user follow a set of users – “friends” – from one dash board). Of all the social media networks available, there are some whose role in the upheaval that toppled the three dictatorial regimes in Africa North of the Sahara are prominent. These are the YouTube, MetaCafe, DailyMotion, and Vimeo¹; they are social networks where video sharing is prominent, and where young people usually post videos for public viewing. These social media sites are public attraction and the YouTube for instance is the third most visited website on the Internet behind Google and Facebook². These are some of the social media platforms, there are others as well, that have been exploited by users in their daily activities and interactions; Instagram, for instance, is another potentially powerful social media platform.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL CHANGE IN AFRICA: TUNISIA, EGYPT AND LIBYA IN PERSPECTIVE

Throughout African’s history distant as well as recent, Africans have resisted forces of domination (Walraven and Abbink 2003: 1). It

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is surprising that the pattern of leadership in post-independence Africa encumbered the people, rendering them helpless and bemused. As we have noted earlier, post-independence African leadership debased democratic norms and principles so much so that the concept was beaten out of shape that it did not matter to them again; and this wrong precedent continued unchecked. In those states where the military did not seize power, they turned one-party totalitarian states and the independence leader remained in power unto death. There was no standard gauge for democracy and the citizens became so emasculated and gagged that the will to rebel became lost. Dictators resent opposition, and their response to any form of opposition or calls for regime change is usually unprecedented repression and violence (Bermeo 1990: 372). The three countries where the forces of regime change mowed down the bastions of dictatorship are by no means the only such case in Africa requiring to be dismantled. Though they fit into patrimonial states, with their leaders being above the law, and often make laws by personal decree. In this respect, patrimonial leaders treat all political and administrative concerns of the state as their own personal affairs; the state is their private property, and the act of ruling is, consequently quite arbitrary (Thomson 2004: 115). They control both the means of production and state resources, and consequently use that to build their support base and coerce opposition. This method of distributing patrimonial benefits was very common in both Libya and Egypt, and indeed other African countries where personal rule operate. The oppressed people cannot be silenced forever, the time-line for tyranny in North Africa ended in the spring of 2011.

The background to protest in North Africa is connected with despotism. The regimes in North African countries have long history of disconnect with liberal democracy and rule of law; and their citizens have been kept in check through oppressive laws and repressive security apparatuses of the state. The citizens having been exploited and abused in almost every ramification of their dealings with the state, decided to act in unison against tyranny while damning the consequences. For “a covenant not to defend [...] self from force by force is always void” (Hobbes 1953: 117); and knowing that tyranny is always ended with force, they rose spontaneously in line with the example of

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the Tunisians. Ben Ali's regime has been one of corruption, and illiberality and this made the Tunisian people lose confidence in him and await the time for change. Though he was able to stabilize the country's economy and the 2010/2011 Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum, ranked Tunisia first in Africa and 32nd globally out of the 139 countries. Yet Ben Ali was unable to improve the unemployment rate in his country particularly among the youth. It was because of the soaring poverty in both the rural areas and among the youthful category as well as his inability to address this chronic challenge that faced the polity that orchestrated the mass protest that turned violent leading to the regime fall. The oppressive response of the regime during the initial days of the protest, which was sparked off by the self-immolation of an unemployed youth who was abused and tormented by security operatives, worsened the crisis. In the early stage of the unrest, the internet was quick at hand to spread the news of the violence. For instance, pictures of youths being brutalized by regime forces and other attacks got hooked into the social media – YouTube, Twitter and Twitpic³. It was these images accessed by people in remote areas of Tunisia and abroad that ignited the citizen's fury against the regime, and elicited the support and sympathy of foreign governments. The declaration of the state of emergency by Ben Ali, and the subsequent dissolution of the government on January 14, 2011, with a promise of new legislative elections within six months, did not save the situation. The violence intensified out of control, and Ben Ali quickly delegated powers to his Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and fled Tunisia with his family. Thus marking the downfall of Ben Ali and the liberation of Algerian from his twenty-four-years totalitarian rule.

Systematically, the protesters using social media posted regularly videos of each demonstration and issue calls for the next one on Facebook and Twitter (*New York Times*, January 14, 2011). According to the *New York Times*, "by many accounts, the new arsenal of social networking helped accelerate Tunisia's revolution, driving the country's 23 years, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, into ignominious exile and igniting a conflagration that has spread across the Arab world at breathtaking speed" (*New York Times*, January 30, 2011). Even the

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blogger Slim Amamou, who was held in Ben Ali's interrogation facility, was released by the fire of the revolution and he was made the new minister for youth; he however resigned that appointment. The other social media aspect of the Tunisian revolution included Twitter updates with stories of state oppression, police brutality and unrest, and tweets feeds of imminent street protests. In all, during the course of the Tunisian revolution, over 30,000 videos were placed on YouTube. The uprising was possible due largely to the availability of internet facilities and smartphones with which protesters and activists communicated and posted images for the consumption of the general public. These images and videos, elicited the sympathy of the out side world. Ben Ali wanted to land in France, and the French authorities denied him landing rights and turned back his air plane, thereby forcing him to fly to Saudi Arabia where he was received for asylum on condition that he would not participate in politics from there.

The defiance of Tunisian protesters and the deepening of the crisis in that state, galvanised the Egyptian populace into action, and this was as a result of the internet and allied social media. Emboldened by the will to "survive or perish", opposition leaders in Egypt declared their struggle a "Day of Rage" against Mubarak's thirty-year misrule. In the assembly of opposition included secularists, Islamists and Communists/ultra-left-wingers, and all the who-is-who in the opposition community of Egypt. The crack-down on the protest by Mubarak's security men could not deter mass protests all over Egypt. The killing of protesters became a source of inspiration and reinvigorated the opposition's will to overthrow the regime. The first wave of opposition lasted for 18 days and the protesters used Twitpic, Facebook and YouTube to disseminate videos and photographs and called on Egyptians wherever they were, to support the protest and bring down the regime. In the January 25, 2011 protest alone, more than 90,000 people signed up on a Facebook page, which was framed by the organisers as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment. The Egyptian government resorted to episodic brutality and censorship, as the videos posted on YouTube and Facebook showed. Even the operators of the social media YouTube mainly censored some protest videos during the protest especially on 25 and 26 Janu-

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ary, 2011. The Egyptian authorities resorted to disruption of internet and cell phone connections in Cairo, Alexandria, and other places in an apparent attempt to break the spread of the protest and the circulation of videos and photographs through the electronic high way, and cutting off social media web sites that had been used to organize the protests, thus complicating efforts on the part of the news media to report the events playing out in Egypt. The authorities went as far as telling mobile operators in the country to suspend services in selected areas of the country to break access to the mobile communications by protesters. Mubarak's internet crackdown betrayed his own fear that Facebook, Twitter, Laptops, and smartphones could empower his opponents, expose his weakness to the world and topple his regime⁴. Thus on February 10, Mubarak ceded power, which was announced by his Vice President Omar Suleiman; the peoples' will prevailed against the powers of a tyrant (*New York Times*, January 14, 30, 25, 26 and 28 2011).

The next example of the role of social media in toppling inglorious regimes in Arab North Africa is Libya. Here, the situation seemed a little different from what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, because Gaddafi's security agents closely monitored communication and this created fear on cell phone users, but yet revolutionaries were able to adapt to the challenges posed by his security networks. While in the two other countries, social media was able to play frontline roles in fuelling the revolution as well as sustaining it; its role in the Libyan revolution was minimal. Protests are not new in North Africa, the ferocity with which their leaders suppress them are what inhibits its recurrence. In Libya for example, in the early 1990s, there was an uprising in the Green Mountain region in the Eastern part of the country, Gaddafi deployed helicopters and bombed the insurgents and the "civilized" world did not do anything about it, because it was not in the news. The instant propagation of visual images through the internet has changed all that – and that is crucial in terms of the kind of pressure the outside world can bear on authoritarian regimes that are in trouble (albeniaassociates.com 2012 on Arab Spring).

The truth of the matter is that the Libyan case was a case apart from the rest of the two countries, though social media worked but

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the argument is that its role in spear-heading the rebellion was minimal. The initial camera pictures that were sent into the internet helped in sensitizing the west on the nature of the brutality being perpetrated by the regime and its surrogates. That also quickened the Arab League's efforts in drafting the "no-fly zone" resolution passed before the Security Council of the United Nations. The fear was that since Gaddafi had blocked communication and internet facilities in Libya that he was going to butcher his own people in his usual characteristic, so the intervention of NATO was the saving-grace of the revolutionaries rather than the social media. Gaddafi as an ego-maniacal autocrat responded with ferocity to the insurgent militia, once NATO stated to aid them and it turned into a "do-or-die" campaign. One interesting feature of the whole revolution in Africa, is that it marked the first time people living under autocratic rule have managed to document their struggles and movements on almost the most micro level imaginable; leaving a long digital trail of Tweets, Facebook posts, Audioboo recording, YouTube videos, blogs and so much more. As Philip Howard observed, "our evidence suggests that social media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for success of political uprising" (quoted in O'Donnell, cited in www.washington.edu/news/articles/new-study-qualifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring).

Looking at these three countries where mass popular uprising overthrew their leaders, in North Africa, one common thread runs across them-that is absolutism. They were all dictators, and had appropriated political power and its perquisites unto themselves and their immediate family. They also wanted to run a dynasty contrary to the interest of the citizens. Mubarak was preparing Gamel his son to take over from him; Ben Ali also wanted power to reside with members of his own family; while Gaddafi prepared Seif Islam his second son to succeed him. These dictators for a long time had many political enemies, but they were fragmented. The success of demand for political change in Tunisia and Egypt led individuals in other countries to pick up the conversation and prepare for spontaneous rebellion leading to the downfall of the three regimes in focus. So opponents used

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social media to identify goals, build solidarity and organize demonstrations. Even when the protesters discovered that the internet access was being blocked by the regimes, they went into the streets to protest, and remained there. These events show that the public sense of shared grievance and potential for change can develop rapidly through shared communication via the social media. For instance, during the week before the falloff Mubarak, the rate of Tweets about political change plummeted. Videos featuring protests and political commentary went viral, with the top twenty-three receiving nearly five and half million views. In Tunisia, 20 per cent of the Blogs were evaluating Ben Ali's leadership the day he resigned from office, and the primary topic for Tunisia Blog was "revolution"⁵. The revolution in these three countries under review is a manifestation of the spirit of self-worth – "that one is a moral agent, capable of free choice"; either to choose to perpetually live under brute dictatorship, or reject it by rebellion. No doubt, social media, played a prominent role in the revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, but its role in Libya was not strong like those of the other two countries, because Gaddafi began early to monitor internet users in Libya. Though the very first pictures and videos of shootings of public protesters in Tripoli and Benghazi fuelled the support of the opposition by western governments. In any case, social media must work hand-in-hand with the ability to mobilize, and this was one aspect of the revolution that gave it the blood and energy it needed to work with. By and large, the social media added new arrows to the quivers of the activists. It was helpful in: *a*) mobilizing protesters rapidly; *b*) undermining regime's legitimacy; and *c*) increasing national and international exposure to regime's atrocities (Haward and Hussain 2011: 35-48).

CONCLUSION

The 2011 mass protests that turned into a revolution, toppling the three regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, is the most intriguing phenomenon of the century, and because of the time it started and the speed with which it spread to other parts of the Arab world, it was

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dubbed the “Arab spring”. Though scholars have differed markedly on the potential contributions of the social media platforms in actualizing the toppling of these regimes in Arab North Africa, it is the opinion of the present authors that social media helped in spurring the push for mass mobilization leading to the revolution. It does not mean that there were no problematic inherent in the process in the affected areas, but it was heavily relied upon as a medium of disseminating the happenings across the world thereby eliciting sympathy and even support from outside. It is a clear demonstration of the peoples’ will to resist terror, despotism, corruption, brigandage, personalization of governance and illiberality, and now a warning to leaders all over the developing world and particularly Africa of the dangers inherent in thwarting public will and abuse of social contract. For the remaining seat-tight and tin-pot dictators like Musaveni, Paul Biya, and Omar Al-Bashir and their likes in Africa, who still do not want to embrace true democracy and allow the voice of the people to reign, their time is coming. Technology is deepening, and closed societies are fast breaking open, with the consequence that people are more aware of their rights now than before and will go for it when their patience is exhausted. Social media has proved to be a potent instrument for change and transformation; its role in the uprisings in North Africa is glaring and significant. Through the videos, pictures and public comments posted on the various social media outlets, people were sensitized on the on-gong revolution in these three countries, and became better mobilized and organised. The outside world also got better informed on the situation in these countries and helped spread the news of the worsening situations there. It is our contention that social media acted as a springboard for the success of the regime change in the three countries under review.

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NOTES

¹ <http://www.about.com>, accessed on 27/03/2012.

² “You Tube” Culled from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

³ [Http://www.socialcapital.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/twitter-facebook-and-youtube-role-in-tunisia-uprising](http://www.socialcapital.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/twitter-facebook-and-youtube-role-in-tunisia-uprising), accessed 9/04/2012.

⁴ “New York Times”, January 30, 2011.

⁵ <http://www.tgdaily.com/software-features/58426-arab-spring-really-was-social-media-revolution>.

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