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Sub-Saharan Africa: Progressive Democracy Protesters Joining Global Campaigns

(U) Key Takeaway

(U) Progressive democracy protesters in Sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly agitated for more accountable governance during the past decade, leading to pockets of democratic reform as well as violence and repression.

- (U) Several progressive civil society groups and activists who have been at the forefront of these protests have begun to form bridges to international movements. In doing so, they have leveraged additional resources to increase the pressure on their governments and shared their decades of post-colonial advocacy experience with the global prodemocracy community.
- African activists' increasingly close ties to US counterparts provide opportunities to advance democratic and governance programming in the region but also could cause African governments to accuse the United States of undermining their authority.

During the past decade, Sub-Saharan African publics have consistently vocalized support for democratic governance, pitting them in many cases against an old guard political class that has maintained power through repressive and coercive tactics. Many African leaders have adjusted their tactics to more effectively control their populations, pitting them against African publics who have channeled their discontentment into protests ranging from organized campaigns to spontaneous riots. As prodemocracy advocates compete with autocrats for the upper hand, many are looking outside their borders for new sources of support and assistance.

(U) Africa Experiencing Growing Number of Mass Protests

(U) We assess that African protest campaigns' growth in size and cohesion during the past decade has increased their ability to push for democratic change. Protest rates in sub-Saharan Africa have increased sharply during the past decade, mirroring a global trend of expanding protest activity across regions, government types, and levels of development.^a

(U) This assessment was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Africa. It was drafted by the National Intelligence Council

(U) **Current Protests a “Third Wave”**

(U) Sub-Saharan Africa’s current increase in protest activity parallels earlier waves of popular mobilization during the last century. The first wave occurred during the 1960s, and was generated by a surge of independence movements, and a second wave began in the late 1980s, propelled by the end of the Cold War and domestic pressure for political reform. Since 2014, protest rates have surged to levels similar to the first two waves, reshaping the governance landscape in much of the region.

- (U) **First Wave (1956-1969).** Many African states achieved independence through nationalist movements that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Thirteen African countries established democratic systems as part of the global wave of democratization after World War II; however, many of the leaders ushered into office swiftly established single-party constitutions.
- (U) **Second Wave (1989-1994).** In the late 1980s, dozens of African leaders facing economic crises turned to the IMF for bailouts, which imposed strict structural adjustment programs that undercut patronage networks, stripped away elite and popular support for the regimes, and led to mass mobilization across more than two-thirds of the region. The wave of protests sparked an era of liberalizing reforms, with 29 African states holding multiparty elections for the first time and 18 incumbents forced out of office. During that time, the collapse of the Soviet Union also reduced support for authoritarians as well as ideological justification for one-party states.
- (U) **An Ongoing Third Wave (2014-present).** In 2014, protests began to increase dramatically, equal to the rates of protest seen in the early 1990s. The region is again facing a debt crisis, forcing many governments to make unpopular fiscal adjustments, and the presidential term limits established by many countries during the second wave are being tested by several leaders, renewing popular efforts to challenge entrenched regimes.

- (U) Although some protests have served illiberal goals—such as xenophobic riots or mobilization on behalf of an autocrat—the sub-continent ranks above every other region globally for citizen mobilization specifically for prodemocracy aims.
- (U) During the past decade, mass mobilization has contributed to or was directly responsible for the removal of leaders in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), The Gambia, Malawi, Mali, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. However, recent coups in Burkina Faso and Sudan have demonstrated the strength of authoritarian

resistance to democracy. [See Appendix A for more information on methodology and data.]

(U) In many cases, African democracy protesters have met with resistance and repression from governments, which has led in several cases to clashes between leaders and citizens, and an overall decline in adherence to democratic norms. Since 2010, African governments’ overall respect for civil liberties has declined yearly, with particularly steep declines among African democracies, according to a Freedom House dataset, even as the overall number of democracies has held steady.

- In 2021, widespread protests erupted in Senegal after security forces arrested a popular opposition leader, in what US diplomats called part

of a “troubling pattern of anti-democratic abuses.” Similarly, in Uganda in 2020, security services killed 54 protesters who took to the streets after the arrest of opposition candidate Bobi Wine, and at least five more protesters were killed when police drove into a crowd of opposition supporters.

- (U) In 2021, demonstrations in Eswatini motivated by accusations of police brutality were met with live fire by security forces, killing more than 70 people, according to international press reporting.
- (U) In select cases, regimes have adopted more subtle techniques to contain dissent, such as investing in online and other surveillance tools to monitor protest leaders, coopting individuals to divide civil society groups, and discrediting opponents on social media, according to academic research and regional experts.

(U) Africa’s Democracy Campaigns Building Global Networks

(U) African democracy advocates are drawing on ties to international groups to bring visibility and resources to their domestic causes and expand the issues included in prodemocracy global conversations.

- (U) In Nigeria, the #EndSARS protests that began in October 2020 against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notoriously abusive arm of the Nigerian police, were propelled by the Nigerian diaspora in the United States, funding from Western organizations, and global celebrity endorsements and solidarity protests, ultimately leading Abuja to disband the group. The organizational backbone of the movement—led by Odunayo Eweniyi and Damilola Odufuwa—has since expanded its efforts to tackle sexual violence and gender issues.
- (U) In 2020, the Zimbabwean diaspora helped expand protests against Harare’s human rights violations into a global campaign by coining the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter. African and Western celebrities picked up the hashtag and

retweeted images of Harare’s human rights violations to their extensive followers. The resulting visibility prompted harsh criticism of the government from regional leaders, according to international press reporting.

- (U) Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi helped to spearhead a protest in response to police killings during Covid-19 lockdowns, invoking the global Black Lives Matter movement to call attention to Kenyans’ experience with abusive security services.

A number of progressive African prodemocracy activists have also become influential in global campaigns on several issues, including racial justice, gender equality, and environmental causes. Some movements in the region are leveraging their record of dismantling colonialist legacies to advocate for social justice causes, according to academic experts.

- In 2021, activists in South Africa advised global Black Lives Matter organizations on strategies for removing segregation-era statues, drawing on their five-year campaign to remove memorials to European colonialists, according to Western press reporting and a South African scholar. Several South African activists have drawn parallels between their country’s apartheid era and the US legacy of segregation to highlight the enduring damage of racial exclusion on democracies, according to Western press reporting and an academic expert.
- Activists from Cameroon, the DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have broadened the Women’s March Global Network’s agenda to include African-centric views of democracy and human rights. African organizers successfully advocated that the network’s agenda should include ending gender-based violence and female genital mutilation, and promoting economic development, peace, and security, explicitly framing such issues as necessary for democratic reform in Africa, according to African activists and outside experts.

(U) Diaspora Ties Radicalizing Some Protest Campaigns

[REDACTED]

underscoring that Africa's increasingly globalized networks are not a uniform boon to democratic efforts on the continent. Some US-based African diaspora advocacy has spawned accusations that Washington is harboring rebels and supporting illiberal ends in Africa.

- [REDACTED] The Cameroonian diaspora [REDACTED] has called on the country's Anglophone population to use violence and has backed secessionist groups since 2016 [REDACTED].
Cameroonian Government officials and public figures have accused Washington of implicitly supporting the separatist movement by refusing to extradite instigators living in the United States [REDACTED].
- [REDACTED] Members of Ethiopia's diaspora have provided financing and materiel support to ethno-nationalist and militia groups, incited riots, and spread inflammatory messages [REDACTED].

inclusion of Global South voices in international fora such as COP26 and the World Economic Forum.



- (U) The founder of the environmental justice NGO Brainforest Gabon, Marc Ona Essangui, has been a vocal advocate for connecting prodemocracy and pro-environmental causes, and speaks frequently at international forums about fighting climate change through more responsive and democratic governance. Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate has cited a connection between poor governance and environmental damage in her country, while successfully advocating for the

(U) Current Racial Justice Movement Finds Parallels in Antiapartheid Struggle

Some progressive African activists have drawn parallels between the South African antiapartheid movement of the 1980s-90s and the current movement for racial justice. The antiapartheid movement was one of the last periods that African protesters engaged in a major global movement.

- (U) The antiapartheid movement connected thousands of civil society organizations in more than 100 countries, including labor unions, sports organizations, faith-based groups, and musical artists. The global movement cultivated international legitimacy for South African protesters, secured financing and resources for antiapartheid pressure groups, exacerbated divisions in the South African Government, and ultimately contributed to the toppling of the apartheid system.
- South Africans “remember fondly” the key contributions of the US legal community, civil society groups, and businesses to South Africa’s antiapartheid movement, which created enduring US soft power in the region, even as many South Africans perceive the US Government’s reputation as tarnished for its late and reluctant support to end apartheid.







