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Social movements in Africa

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Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco: since early 2011, television news worldwide has shown people protesting against their governments on a nearly daily basis. Not only is the frequency of media reports on the protests new, but also that the demonstrations are explicitly presented as political movements. When tens of thousands of people marched in numerous cities (such as Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, Douala in Cameroon, or Port-au-Prince in Haiti) around the globe against the high costs of living in 2008, their protests were called 'food riots' and put in the socio-economic frame of hunger and poverty. This is not to say that socio-economic grievances were not behind the 2008 demonstrations – but those 'food riots' equally aimed at bringing down governments and initiating political change, and high prices might also have been a trigger of what is now called the 'Arab spring'. We currently observe that political resistance is perceived as something positive: media and 'Western' politics do no longer call for an almost apolitical 'civil society' but appreciate social movements that aim at bringing down their respective governments. We argue that in some respect, there is a new quality in how African social movements are presented in 'Western' media and politics: Recently, trying to bring down governments is presented in positive ways whereas in the years before, social movements were supposed to be a 'civil society' almost stabilizing the state. Speculations circulate that the current protests will not stop in Northern Africa and the Middle East: "Will the Arab Uprising Spread to Sub Saharan Africa?", Nairobi's *Daily Nation* headlines[2], referring to Zimbabwe, Uganda and Senegal.

Nevertheless, the study of African social movements so far is a neglected field of research in African Studies and Social Sciences. Not only does Africa

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[2] Daily Nation, 8 September 2011

remain largely absent from social science research using a social movement perspective. Social movement theory largely focuses on socio-political movements in Europe, North- and South America (cf. Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998; Della Porta/Diani 1999). In addition the social movement theory literature has so far hardly been explored within African studies, even though a growing number of empirical studies are dealing with different forms of civil action and political mobilization in African contexts.[3] Especially compared to Latin American Studies where labour unions, landless workers' movements or feminist movements are central terrains of both empirical and theoretical investigation (cf. Eckstein 1989; Escobar/Alvarez 1992), social movements in Africa largely remain under-researched and under-theorised. This is particularly true for African studies in German speaking countries, where any attempt to take a critical inventory in this respect is missing. However, to some extent the neglect of a social movement perspective applies to African Studies more generally.

Though social movements are now also recognized by 'Western' academics, politics and media as actors of social and political change in Africa, there are few recent studies in the social sciences on the subject. For this reason, our aim is to explore how far current social movements in sub-Saharan Africa are actors that take a critical stance towards social and political domination. Which social movements shape the political landscape of contemporary African societies? What are the strategies they use to intervene in social debates and influence politics? How do social movements in Africa mobilize, given the context of ongoing resource scarcity? Finally, in which ways do African social movements participate in global alliances?

Research on social movements is closely linked to the empirical phenomena studied in Europe and Northern America: 'old' social movements, notably workers movements and unionism; civil rights movements (in particular the US Black Power Movement); and the so-called 'new social movements' emerging in the 1980s such as movements against nuclear power, for gender

[3] Cf. Klopp/Orina 2002; Leslie 2006; Polet 2007; Halim 2009; Harsch 2009; Odion-Akhaine 2009. A particularly well studied case is the Republic of South Africa. Scholars have explored the struggle against Apartheid (van Kessel 2000) as well as a broad range of movements in post-Apartheid South Africa: against privatisation and liberalisation of basic social services (e.g. water and health services) or discrimination related to sexual identity; for land rights or gender equality (cf. Bond 1999; Ballard et al. 2005; Alexander 2010; Celik 2010).

equality, for sexual identity rights, and others. Starting from the 1960s, social movement studies were funded upon Mancur Olson's 'logic of collective action' (Olson 1965) and tried to explain why people participate in public protest even though 'free riding' seems to be more rational for them. Building upon the assumption of rationalist logics of action, resource mobilization theory argues that protest depend on which material, ideal and personnel resources can be mobilized (McCarthy/Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983). Charles Tilly was among the first to shift the focus from pure mobilization to the political system social movements act in (Tilly 1978; cf. Kitschelt 1986). Accordingly, political-structural conditions (for instance, institutional openness, ability and will for repression) explain why protest does or does not occur. The focus thereby is on formal political institutions and structures. Scholars from different theoretical perspectives agree that social movements and protest basically come from social, political and economic grievances. But grievances as such do not necessarily result in collective action. Whereas the first studies, focussing on the costs and benefits of protest participation and on political opportunity structures, aimed at explaining why people join social movements and protests, from the 1980s on, researchers have started to ask why some issues seem to be more suitable for protest than others and tried to explain the dynamics of mobilization (rather than the simple reason why people do or do not protest). They argue that 'framing' – how grievances are interpreted – is a decisive factor of protest and mobilization (McAdam 2001; Snow 2004; Polletta/Ho 2006). Thus far, there is hardly any research combining social movement theory and the study of protest in Africa.[4]

Social movements in the African context: an upcoming field of research?

The hitherto most influential book on social movements in Africa in general is a volume edited by Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (Mamdani/Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995). 'African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy' was published by CODESRIA[5] in 1995 and only sparsely referred to in the European debate. Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba

[4] Some authors in this issue try to bridge the gap and critically assess how far social movement theory can help to develop a better understanding of contemporary political contention in Africa (cf. contributions by Alex Veit and Elísio Macamo).

[5] The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, see www.codesria.org

aimed at revealing how theories and debates within African studies ignore social movements. They argue that scholars reproduce an allegedly universal idea of 'civil society' that is deeply rooted the dualism of tradition and modernity emerging from modernisation theory. Only recently have European scholars started to look at African social movements both from the perspective of African and social movement studies. The volume edited by Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (Ellis/van Kessel 2009b) comprises eight case studies, mostly on Anglophone African states (Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone; Mauretania and Somalia with Arabic respectively Somali as the official language are the only exceptions). Ellis and van Kessel do not start with a definition of social movements based on the literature. Their idea is rather to look at different examples of African movements in order to compare empirical findings with existing theoretical perspectives afterwards. Ellis and van Kessel raise the general question of whether social movements are to be understood as a global phenomenon or whether African movements rather do fundamentally differ from those in Europe or the Americas.

In 2010, the *Review of African Political Economy* published a special issue on 'Social movement struggles in Africa' (Vol. 37, Iss. 125). This issue is complementary to Ellis' and van Kessels edited volume as it presents several case studies mostly from French speaking countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal and the DRC. The articles were first presented at a conference held in Paris in early 2010. Interestingly, this conference was not explicitly on social movements – at least, the name did not suggest it: '*lutter dans les Afrique*'[6] ('*struggles in the Africas*'). Applying a broad concept of African social movements including trade unions, religious organizations and NGOs, ROAPE's editor Miles Larmer argues that at all times, social movements in Africa have been firmly influenced by external, notably 'Western' actors, concepts and norms.

> [S]ocial movements actually existing in Africa are unavoidably hybrid in nature, utilising and adapting Western ideas, funding, forms of organisation and methods of activism. Consequently, the enduring influence of universalist models that have their origins in the West, and the profound inequalities and power relations between Western agencies

[6] Cf. also *Genèses* No. 4/2010 (81), Banégas et al. 2010

and African social movements, should be part of the analysis of social movements (Larmer 2010: 257; vgl. Pommerolle/Siméant 2008).

Ellis and van Kessel argue equally that financial dependency from external donors, directly or indirectly via local NGOs, is a characteristic feature of several social movements in Africa (Ellis/van Kessel 2009a). Researchers and activist frequently discuss this influence controversially.

We agree with Larmer that, without doubt, international and in particular 'Western' actors, ideas and norms do influence African social movements and struggles. Beyond that, we stress two aspects: first, social movements do exist in Africa which less reflect 'Western' ideas – and that, therefore, they are hardly recognized as social movements from a Western perspective, neither academic nor activist. These are, for instance, religious organizations such as the *Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria*, described by Benjamin Soares (Soares 2009) or ethno-nationalist movements as portrayed by Kehinde Olayode in this issue. Second, rather than seeing African movements one-sidedly shaped by global and 'Western' influences, we emphasize that histories and concepts of 'Africa' and 'the West' are inseparably interlinked and interwoven (cf. Randeria 1999). We can only imagine 'African' social movements by necessarily comparing them to an imagined Northern/Western counterpart; at the same time, these 'Western' actors, scholars, concepts, ideas and norms only become 'Western' through the polarized construction of 'the West and the rest', as Stuart Hall put it (Hall 1992), meaning that they are defined against an 'Oriental' or 'African' Other.

This Stichproben issue aims at continuing the debate on social movements in Africa that was started by Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba in the 1990s and re-started in contemporary times by Ellis and van Kessel as well as the ROAPE issue. Several important questions still remain to be discussed, including the ambivalent relationship of African social movements towards the colonial and post-colonial state and vis-à-vis external actors, including the risk of being controlled by donors and international NGOs.

Contemporary social movements – in Africa as elsewhere – can only be understood against the background of the historical and social-political surroundings they emerged from. Regarding the historical emergence of macro-economic structures, Larmer distinguishes four historical periods of social movement struggles in Africa: nationalism and liberation struggles in the 1950s and 60s, suppression and incorporation from 1960-75, economic

crisis and structural adjustment from 1975-89, and pro-democracy movements from 1990-2010. Unlike Larmer, we focus on the dimension of power and (state) domination and identify four (slightly different) overlapping historical phases that are relevant for the understanding of social movements in contemporary Africa. In doing so, we do not deny that local and regional contexts are shaped by a very specific historicity and by no means that Africa 'as a whole' could be ascribed a uniform history. However we do assume that some historical macro trends can be identified that are relevant at least for several African countries. The four historical phases we identify are the following: firstly, the phase of colonization and decolonization: anti-colonial liberation movements are historically relevant social movements. Secondly, in several countries a period followed when liberation movements held state power – and often performed much more repressively than a lot of supporters locally and internationally had hoped. Thirdly, in the early 1990s a phase of political system transformation started in numerous states, and enormous democratic hopes were put on the respective 'civil societies'. A fourth period followed, its characteristic being the co-optation of 'civil societies' by international agencies and donors such as the World Bank. In this period, for instance, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans emerged and a number of civil society actors transformed themselves into professional development agencies. These agencies partly substitute the state insofar as they fulfil tasks that state agencies are supposed to carry out. For most people (in Africa as elsewhere), one of the state's main tasks is to guarantee access to basic social services, notably health and education. Without reproducing neoliberal allegations of 'state failure', from a basic social service provision perspective, the coverage of several states in Africa is limited. In numerous cases, the state happens to be authoritarian and aggressive.[7] However, for social movements in Africa, their relationship vis-à-vis the state is a core question.

Civil society and social movements

In our view, the term 'social movements' provides a different approach to societal developments than the term 'civil society' does. Although both can

[7] Needless to say, that both features – limited basic social services and authoritarian states – are not to be observed exclusively in Africa but in all historical and spatial contexts around the globe.

help to describe the same empirical realities, actors, and organizations, they make it possible to look at them from different angles. As the term 'civil society' is much more prevalent in African Studies today, we will briefly recapitulate the changing connotations of this contested concept. This helps us to distinguish our approach to social movements from present-day mainstream approaches to African politics that often rely on a constricted understanding of civil societies.

After the decline of single party rule in Eastern and Central Europe, a process often associated with the successful impact of 'civil society', African Studies in the early 1990s were characterised by highly controversial perspectives on the outlooks and potentials of civil societies in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the height of this debate was limited to a few years. As in literature on civil societies in general, most of the literature on African civil societies follows a basic conceptual differentiation. The term 'civil society' refers to several concepts. In a rather descriptive way, it refers to a societal sphere between state institutions and familial structures. At the same time – and in a more normative way – it pictures either dynamics which countervail a total appropriation of a society by a state or the site of production of hegemonial discourses which provide a resource of legitimacy for state power.[8]

When first appearing prominently within the field of African Studies in the mid-1980s, the term 'civil society' was mainly used to identify spaces of political opposition and autonomy. Influenced by the success of civil societies in engaging authoritarian states in Eastern Europe, several authors conceptualized African civil societies as defenders against the monopolisation of society by the state. Jean-François Bayart describes how throughout the 1980s grassroots organizations tried to establish independent spaces against the postcolonial African "Policeystaat" (Bayart 1986). Crawford Young caricatured this later as the juxtaposition of "a veritably satanic state" and an "angelic civil society" (Young 1994: 47). In the following years, this binary conception of a totalitarian state and a rather monolithic civil society fighting over rooms for manoeuvre was pushed aside by approaches that

[8] Mamdani underlines the difference between the last two currents and distinguishes "society centrists", which undertake the fostering of civil societies against society's appropriation by the state, and "state centrists", which imagine the state as an autonomous sphere of universal representation of interests and as an outcome of conflicts within civil society (Mamdani 1995).

highlighted their interdependency. The early 1990s were characterised by a change of perspective from the state to society as the main sphere of political negotiation, where the "state-in-society" (Migdal 2003) became one player amongst others (Kunz 1995: 183). As a result, civil society was no longer understood as an *a priori* space of homogenous political opposition, but as a rather unpredictable factor (Fatton 1992) intrinsically infused by conflicting and even politically conservative interests based on sex, ethnic identities, social class, etc. However, several authors started to focus on political negotiations based on these differences as a resource of legitimacy for state politics (Harbeson 1994).

At the same time, the good governance-paradigm began to offer new programmatic perspectives for the duties of civil societies. The idea of the state as a set of neutral institutions that just need sound administration (a transparent budget, rule of law, fight against corruption etc.) went along with structural adjustment programmes and privatisations that allowed the implantation of former state responsibilities within the wider society. Broad societal participation in governance issues turned into a major point of reference for the debate on civil society and raised awareness of two dynamics between civil society and the state: Firstly, ongoing authoritarian structures and the dismantling of public social services motivated some political actors to digress from state institutions. Civil society became conceptualised as a shelter for disadvantaged social stratums that turn away from the state instead of confronting it. Often supported by Northern NGOs, grassroots organizations started to organize their own supply with social services and thereby structurally replaced and supported the state. Secondly, the idea of participation in governance issues allowed for the conceptualisation of civil society organizations as independent organs for the control of the government, as intermediate structure between the state and local populations or as multiplicators of ideas of human and civil rights or rule of law (Chazan 1994; Gyimah-Boadi 1996).[9]

[9] The good governance paradigm of a state with neutral interests faced heavy criticism. According to Robert Fatton, this concept ignores class differences that render a balance of interests through a universal participation of all citizens in state issues impossible. Liberal democracy could not be implemented in Africa as the simultaneous introduction of market economies and privatizations stabilized ruling classes instead of opening up new opportunities for the socially disadvantaged (Fatton 1992, 1995).

Approaches that frame civil society actors as stakeholders of an opposition to governments or as independent movers of powerful political discourses have been in decline over the last decade. Although civil societies continue to be analysed as a major factor in democratization processes, they seem to be programmatically understood as fulfilling a rather complementary function within the state by providing legitimacy and social services. State building tends to come first, democracy second (cf. Ottaway 2003).[10] This understanding correlates with developments in Africa since the 1990s. Supported by bi- and multilateral donors, many old and new sub-Saharan civil society actors turned into professional service providers and consultancies.

Social movements can be defined as "interlocking networks of groups, social networks and individuals, and the connection between them is a shared collective identity that tries to prevent societal change by non-institutionalized tactics" (van Stekelenburg/Klandermans 2009: 20f; cf. Della Porta/Diani 1999). Bearing this in mind, the literature on civil societies did often deal with actors that could equally be described as social movements. However, we do not simply want to replace one term by another. Instead, we want to distinguish our approach to the actors under study from the currently predominating discourse on civil society as a service provider or as a resource of state legitimacy. As opposed to this predominant meaning that the term has gained over the last twenty years, we want to turn the analytical focus back on the actors. We feel that with the ongoing focus on the integration of civil society actors into the projected good governance structures, a broader perspective on their political demands, organizational structures, modes of mobilization, 'collective identities' or 'non-institutionalized tactics' has been lost. With our conceptual choice of the term social movements, we want to highlight a shift towards a perspective that does justice to these factors.[11] Furthermore, a social movements approach can go beyond the common civil society approach in order to underline the critical or – possibly – emancipatory stance social actors take to-

[10] Mamdani sees a risk in an overly positive perception of the state. Through the good governance project, the quest for more state efficiency would have become more popular than the one for more democracy (Mamdani 1995)

[11] However, if we (as researchers) do recognize social movements or civil societies, this is undoubtedly subject to scholarly trends. We thus underline that we understand both concepts as analytical (and normative) perspectives that could both be applied to the same historical phases.

wards dominant political relations. It reveals how they demand more democratic participation in the formation of societal activities and state policies or take them into their own hands.

About this issue

The range of social movements is huge: from looser groups such as some neighbourhood, women's or youth groups and more or less spontaneous protests to well organized and highly institutionalized forms such as trade unions. As a matter of course, one journal issue can only represent a very small section of the highly diverse reality of social movements in contemporary Africa. Nevertheless, examples of at least some of the core actors are portrayed in this issue such as trade unions (Danièle Obono) and women's movements (Andrea Kaufmann). Other, no less important ones such as students' movements are missing. A core question is in how far social movements qua definition have to be emancipatory in their aims – and how the emancipatory potential should be defined. With regard to the emancipatory potential of social movements, case studies in this issue include movements by socially marginalized people, namely slave descendants (Lotte Pelckmans and Eric Hahonou). They also raise the question in how far ethnonationalist movements can be seen as being emancipatory (Kehinde Olayode). All empirical cases analysed in this issue show that the state is the core point of reference for social movements: all movements presented here address the state in one way or another. For instance, democracy movements try to hinder presidential third terms (Boniface Dulani); women's movements demand the legal persecution of sexualized violence. Case study examples come from more or less all regional and linguistic areas of sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria, Liberia and Mali in Western Africa, Mozambique and Angola, Malawi and Namibia, and the DRC. Given the fact that the Republic of South Africa is the only country whose social movements have been widely studied in existing literature, in this special issue, we deliberately do not focus on RSA. In addition to single and comparative case studies, two articles aim at advancing the theoretical debate on social movements in Africa.

The first one is *Alex Veit*'s contribution on 'direct internationalised rule'. Starting from the example of demobilized militia fighters in the DRC who partly organized themselves in an association trying to bring their request forward to international organizations, Veit analyses the relationship be-

tween international authorities (such as UN agencies) and individuals (such as the former combatants in DRC). In order to theoretically capture these relations, he scrutinizes approaches from social movement theory, global governance, and governmentality studies. He concludes that "a political sociology of contestation of internationalized rule needs to carve out the overlapping aspects of studies of contention and everyday resistance".

In contrast, *Elísio Macamo* argues that the concept of social movements "may prove inadequate to a study of contestation in African settings". For Macamo, the social movements research programme suffers from an all too dominant relation to European experiences and from the tendency to frame any form of social contestation as political protest. As an alternative to this concept which "packages contestation into a normative frame of reference that lends normative and teleological legitimacy to protest", he defends the use of the term 'social criticism' to avoid passing judgement on the societal relevance of contestation.

The first case study article is a study of Nigerian trade unions. *Danièle Obono* analyses the role labour unions have played in Nigerian politics since the 1990s. Trade unions, she argues, function at the same time as producers of compromise between social actors and the state and as actors of contentious politics.

Boniface Dulani presents the case of Democracy Movements in Malawi, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia. Based on the analysis of political struggles to implement presidential term limits in these countries, he underlines several conditions which contribute to these movements' success or failure. Dulani sums up his findings in a catalogue that might prove to be useful when looking at other Democracy Movements, too.

The case analysed by *Lotte Pelckmans* and *Eric Hahonou* is an important feature in Western African politics, though nearly unknown in the European public: social movements of slave descendants. The legacies of slavery are not a matter of the past but still relevant in African social and political life. The authors present in detail the case of an emancipatory movement engaged in Malian identity politics on behalf of former Kel Tamasheq (Tuareg) slaves. They show how contemporary anti-slavery movements mobilize, what they claim and how they succeed or fail to achieve their aims. Comparing it to similar movements in several other West African states (Niger, Benin, Mauretania), Pelckmans and Hahonou argue that anti-slavery movements differ from other struggles such as 'food riots', women's or

peasant's movements. Movements of slave descendants pursue ideological aims related to citizenship and identity that are closely linked to material issues. The specificity of African anti-slavery movements, they suggest, is that they address ideological and material issues simultaneously.

Kehinde Olayode examines four ethno-nationalist organizsations in different parts of Nigeria. In particular, he explores these groups' influence on national politics and attempts to answer the question in how far they enhance popular participation. Ethno-nationalist movements, he argues, differ in many respects from 'conventional' civil society groups. Their roots are cultural ones, though since the early 1990s, they have started to engage in political struggles. They use human rights rhetoric in a highly selective way, and they mobilize on the grass roots level based on identity frameworks of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Mobilizsation based on ethno-nationalist identities is a characteristic feature of Nigerian politics also discussed as 'the national question'. Olayode concludes that "the inability of the various groups to resolve or agree on some of the issues related to the 'national question' is primarily responsible for the fragmentation of social movements in Nigeria along ethno-regional lines."

Andrea Kaufmann presents an example of women's movements. The case of Liberia is a particular one insofar as Liberian women's groups have played an important role in the peace movement that contributed to the end of the longstanding civil war. Nowadays, eight years after the war ended, women's organizations engage in post-conflict issues such as ending gender based violence or improving their communities' living conditions. In her anthropological study, Kaufmann describes the West Point Women, a women's organization in a quarter of Monrovia. She shows that the women primarily address the state which they keep responsible for social and economic grievances. Therefore, Kaufmann argues, women's groups are vital actors promoting social change on the local level and beyond.

Some of the papers in this issue have been presented at the 4th European Conference on Africans Studies in Uppsala, 15-18 June 2010. Those contributions to the ECAS double session 'social movements in Africa' that are not present in this journal can be found either at the conference website[12] or have been published elsewhere (van Kessel 2009; Daniel 2011).

[12] www.nai.uu.se/ecas-4/panels/41-60/panel-60/

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