

Peaceful Change in Africa

Adams Bodomo

Abstract In this talk, I critically examine the concept of peaceful change in Africa. I outline some mechanisms or processes leading to peaceful change in different parts of Africa. I then argue that change can only be peaceful in the long run if it is meaningful, thus introducing the concept of meaningful peaceful change. In this sense, turbulent but more meaningful people power movements, as happened in many parts of Africa such as the so-called Arab spring uprisings of the Maghreb and the Sudan uprising, must also be seen as peaceful change because the processes of change was instigated by the masses which in many ways created more meaningful change. I conclude the talk by suggesting that peaceful change can only happen in Africa if external powers stop exploiting the resources of Africa and institute a more symmetrical world systems order.

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that Africa is a continent with many hot spots of political, economic and social instability. Internal political conflict leading to the rise of rebel groups and religious terrorist groups are aspects of this instability. These instabilities have often led to violent regime changes in the form of coups d'états.

However, in the midst of all this, there could exist processes of peaceful and orderly change which are sometimes overlooked. What is peaceful change? Are there really instances of peaceful change in Africa, and if so, what are the mechanisms or processes of peaceful change on the continent?

Peaceful change according to Owada (2007) "(...) is a multifaceted concept that refers to many diverse processes for bringing about change in international situations through peaceful means. In this broad sense, the concept can comprise any 'process of changing international legal and extralegal norms or some structures of the international system based on such norms without the use of force'."¹

According to Kornprobst (forthcoming), peaceful change has elements of restraint, compromise and polylogue (a loser form of dialogue). Conflicts are always to be expected. But they can stop short of war (by restraint), be transformed through negotiations by meeting somewhere in the middle (compromise) and even by reasoning together about how to move forward (polylogue).

All these three elements (restraint, compromise and polylogue) have been involved in many types of political movements in Africa that have led to nonviolent changes. So yes, there have been instances of peaceful change in Africa!

2. Processes of peaceful change in Africa:

There exist several processes or mechanisms that have led to peaceful socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in Africa, but I will focus on two here: the concept of National Conferences and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

2.1 National Conferences:

As Heilbrunn (1993) and Nwajiaku (1994) show, between 1990 and 1997, there were as many as six *conférences nationales* (national conferences) in former French colonies of

¹ Owada 2007.

Africa, two of the most prominent of which were Benin and Togo. These conferences were involved in bringing all the stakeholders of the country together to find a way out of national crises, and to draw up a constitution to pave the way for elections and the peaceful transfer of power.

2.2 Truth and Reconciliation Commissions:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a well-known mechanism in (South) African history that has been used to achieve peaceful change in post-apartheid South Africa. It comes with a mix of indigenous methods of peaceful conflict resolution, all based on the philosophy of Ubuntu. Gade (2013) has taken a critical look at this in regard to the idea of restorative justice.

3. Meaningful Peaceful Change: People Power

Besides the two mechanisms or processes mentioned above there are more turbulent (though not necessarily violent) mechanisms of change that I refer to as people power instigated change. These are often movements involving people spontaneously pouring onto the streets and demonstrating or getting involved in all kind of acts of civil disobedience to press for political and social change. Examples of this happened in North African Maghrebian countries like Tunisia and Egypt at the turn of the Millennium (The Arab Spring) and recently in Sudan.

It is this kind of change that I refer to as meaningful peaceful change; and which I define as change that leads to a real transfer of power from the elites to the masses and which may engender a fairer sharing of the national cake. People power instigated change could still be peaceful in the sense that it could still involve elements of restraint (peaceful demonstrations), compromise (in the form of negotiated bargaining), and polylogue (in the form of the multiple voices demanding change in the streets). It is, however, meaningful because the end result is more often that real power is transferred to the masses that are demanding the change.

In comparison to the more traditional forms of peaceful change such as national conferences of the former French colonies and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, where peaceful transitions have occurred without real power changing from the elites and fairer income distribution, people power movements have often ended with more meaningful change. Many of the National Conferences still ended with dictatorships as happened in Togo and Gade (2013) is very critical of the successes of the TRC in the sense that it has hardly achieved any kind of restorative justice in South Africa.

4. Conclusion

I conclude this talk by reminding the audience that while Africa is often seen as a region of violent hot spots, there have also been many instances of peaceful socio-political changes in many parts of the continent. What should be more important is to look at who this peaceful change benefits. If peaceful change results in power being in the hands of the political and economic elites, then the peaceful change is meaningless. We need to look to creating conditions for meaningful peaceful change and this involves change that results in a fairer sharing of the national cake.

Finally, peaceful change can only be sustained in Africa if external powers desist from exploitative and imperialistic engagements with African polities.

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Prof. Dr. Adams Bodomo, a native of Ghana, is professor of African studies at the University of Vienna, Austria. He is the author of over 10 books and over a 100 journal articles and book chapters. Two of his recent book publications are *Africans in China* (Cambria Press 2012) and *The Globalization of Foreign Investment in Africa: The Role of Europe, China and India* (Emerald Publishing 2017).