



Uprisings, but not Reawakenings

The African Renaissance was meant to visualise space for people to determine their own destiny. By this yardstick it has failed, writes Thabo Mbeki

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The year 2011 began with popular uprisings in the Arab world that started in the African Maghreb and Egypt. Described by some as an Arab Reawakening, we must answer the question whether, in reality, these uprisings do not also represent an African Reawakening.

Those of us committed to the renaissance – the rebirth – of Africa have an obligation to understand what the popular uprisings in the African Maghreb and Egypt mean in the context of that renaissance.

Simply put, do they advance or retard this African rebirth?

One of the central objectives of the African Renaissance is the creation of the necessary space for the peoples of Africa to determine their destiny. The renaissance visualises a democratic Africa, consistent with and focused on the objective – the people shall govern!

It will be a genuine renaissance only if it is the product of the conscious activity of the African masses across their various racial, ethnic, class, gender and other social divides.

Surely we should understand the concept and practice of reawakening as an expression of the social processes according to which the masses of the people act in the political sphere as conscious and purposeful determinants of their own destiny, committed to fashion the nature of their societies.

The African Renaissance should be a manifestation of an African Reawakening, while the reawakening should serve as the motive for the achievement of the renaissance.

In what sense, then, should we promote the African Reawakening expressed in the popular uprisings in the African Maghreb as an integral part of the African democratic revolution?

The historic African struggles for liberation from imperialist and colonial domination sought to achieve both national independence and the transfer of power to the people – that is, genuine democratic rule. Accordingly, these struggles were an expression of the commitment of the African masses to achieve their own national democratic revolutions.

As Africans we are very familiar with our own history, which is littered with many instances during which the democratic revolutions were subverted and aborted, including through military coups and the establishment of dictatorial governments through other means.

In all these instances, when the national democratic revolutions were compromised, inevitably state power was used not to advance the interests of the people as a whole but fundamentally to serve the interests of a narrow ruling elite, which would invariably ally itself with foreign interests determined to achieve their own objectives, regardless of the fate of the masses.

We can therefore say that the crisis of governance in Africa during years of independence, with all its consequences, developed from the subversion or abortion of the national democratic revolutions for which the African masses fought as they engaged in struggle to liberate themselves from imperialism and colonialism.

The popular uprisings in North Africa have affected particularly Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

What is common to the politics of these three African countries is that the ruling group in each country had been in power for more than two decades before 2011 with no possibility to change this reality through democratic elections.

Effectively, the systems of governance established in this part of the African Maghreb and Egypt constituted a negation of the objectives of the African democratic revolution and were inimical to the achievement of the renaissance of Africa to the extent that they were constructed to prevent the masses of people in this part of the African Maghreb from shaping their own futures.

Surely, ordinary common sense must communicate the message that these systems could not have survived as long as they did if they were not buttressed by pervasive repression, consciously targeted at denying the people the right freely to express their will, and therefore to determine their destiny.

The tenancy of the entrenched ruling elites in these North African countries could only be guaranteed by continued repression which, inevitably, would lead to growing discontent and therefore ever greater repression.

In these countries, we are dealing with masses of people who have experience as conscious actors in the struggle to determine their own destiny. They gained this experience in the struggles for independence against imperialism and colonialism, in efforts to reconstruct their countries as independent and democratic African states, and in the struggle for the liberation of the people of Palestine.

Thus, the sustained abuse of state power to demobilise them as conscious agents of change, to perpetuate exclusive rule by particular elites, and therefore to subvert the national democratic revolution assumed that these masses would come to unlearn the lesson that they are makers of history.

The popular uprisings in the African Maghreb and Egypt prove that this has failed. At the same time, the cold fact is that nobody, including the heroic masses of the African Maghreb and Egypt, knows the shape and content of the new societies which will emerge as a consequence of the historic popular uprisings.

Our concern is whether and in what way the popular uprisings constitute the following:

- * a reassertion of the right of the African masses to determine their destiny and recover their democratic right to govern;
- * a resumption of the struggle for the victory of the national democratic revolution;
- * a rebellion against the abuse of power by ruling elites to enrich themselves at the expense of the people;
- * an affirmation of the determination of the African masses to ensure that the national wealth is used to end poverty and underdevelopment and to bridge the disparities in income, wealth and opportunity;
- * confirmation of the determination of the masses of the African people to achieve their human dignity and the commitment to rely on their native intelligence and labour to realise their all-round development.

As militants of the African Renaissance, we cannot but be inspired by the fact that the masses of the people in the African Maghreb and Egypt have engaged in struggle as courageously as they have to pursue these objectives, all of which constitute the very core elements of that renaissance.

To some within the “left” and especially the “right,” the end of the Cold War signified that the Age of Revolution had ended. Significantly, the right argued that history had reached its final station, suggesting that a dominant feature of the new epoch was that the historic popular upheavals characteristic of all revolutions had run their course.

For the right, in essence, this meant propagating a thesis that henceforth fundamental social change would be a top-down process and therefore there was no alternative but to depend on the ruling elites on our continent to pursue the objectives of African national democratic revolutions. In this paradigm the masses of the people would still have the possibility to publicly express their views, including by taking to the streets. However, such popular action would serve essentially to influence the “top” to take the right decisions.

This did not exclude the possibility that this top could, in its own interest, mobilise the “bottom” to take to the streets essentially as a mass army to legitimise the narrow interests of the ruling elites.

The popular uprisings in the African Maghreb and Egypt have shattered the illusion that the Age of Revolution has ended and that only the ruling elites have the capacity to reinstate into African reality the objectives of the African democratic revolution.

Strangely, contrary to what would have happened during the Cold War years and the two centuries before, the 2011 uprisings in the African Maghreb were welcomed both by the broad left and the broad right tendencies in contemporary global politics.

Does this suggest that now there is a benign global convergence between the left and the right around the inalienable and universal entitlement of the individual to democratic rule and human rights, regardless of nationality, and between Africa and the erstwhile colonial powers?

As activists of the African Renaissance, and given both our experience and actuality, we have to ask ourselves whether, in this regard, appearance truly coincides with and represents our reality.

It would seem self-evident that, by all standards, the inspiring popular uprisings in the African Maghreb and Egypt are indeed popular. At the same time, both left and right, in Africa and the rest of the world, have understandably characterised these uprisings as revolutions. Yet, by definition, revolution means a fundamental change in the social order.

Such revolutionary change results in the birth of new societies that set themselves the task to achieve – and actually pursue – objectives fundamentally different from those that characterised the old order overthrown by revolution.

The mere removal from power of heads of state and their associates does not in itself amount to revolutionary change, even as it is both substantially and symbolically important.

The reality is that both the left and the right have celebrated globally the important fact of the popular uprisings, which represent an affirmation of the right of all human beings freely to participate in the process to determine their destiny.

This constitutes a celebration of, and support for, the right of every individual to express his or her will and therefore to influence the future. It does not, however, address the vitally important issue of the end result of the exercise of this right. As activists of the African Renaissance, we must therefore, even as we lend maximum support to the popular uprisings, keep our focus on the fundamental question of what kind of societies the uprisings will produce.

We must, at all costs, resist the temptation to assume that these uprisings, heroic, inspiring, and welcome as they are, amount to the national democratic revolutions marking the resumption in the

African Maghreb and Egypt of the processes that would lead to the victory of the African Renaissance.

It is perfectly possible that this is exactly what will happen. It is, however, critically important that we do not take this possibility as a sufficient condition for the beginning of the process leading to the rebirth of Africa and that we therefore recognise the popular uprisings do not necessarily amount to the reassertion of the primacy of the African democratic revolution.

As activists of the African Renaissance, we warmly welcome the popular uprisings in Afro-Arab states in the expectation that they represent popular national democratic revolutions.

We therefore hope that as an expression of such revolutions, they will result in the following:

- * the establishment of truly democratic systems of governance, even as the specific forms of government would take into account the peculiarities of each country;
- * the assertion of the genuine independence of each and all African countries;
- * the construction of new societies free of discrimination, including racial, ethnic, and gender inequality;
- * the use of democratic power to ensure a better life for all the people, and therefore the elimination of poverty and underdevelopment;
- * a sustained effort to create an egalitarian society by reducing gross inequality in wealth, income, and opportunity and to eradicate systemic corruption;
- * the restoration of the dignity of all Africans by asserting their equality with all other members of the human family;
- * the positioning of Africa and the African Diaspora as an equal participant in the processes that determine the future of humanity as a whole.

This surely means that the African masses actively involved in the struggle for change should know not only what they are fighting against but also what new social order they are struggling to establish. These masses should develop a level of consciousness such that they are able to reject neocolonial superintendence and act independently to determine the future of their countries and societies.

All this presents the challenge to all activists of the African Renaissance not only to express solidarity with the popular uprisings, but to engage with the risen masses to develop a common African perspective focused on joint action to achieve Africa's renaissance.

The masses engaged in mass struggle should be mobilised to see themselves as activists for the renaissance of Africa and not only as activists for the victory of the national democratic revolutions in their countries.

In this context, we should recall the impulses that, during the last century, resulted in the convening of the Pan-African congresses and the formation, before the birth of the OAU, of the Casablanca bloc to which, to the best of our knowledge, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya belonged.

At the base of these desires was the realisation that we would not succeed as Africans in overcoming the legacy of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism, nor in defeating poverty and underdevelopment and gaining our rightful place in the ordering of international affairs, if we did not combine in action to confront our shared challenges.

Such efforts affirmed that the struggles for independence, separate and disparate as they might have seemed, were nevertheless part of an integrated whole because all of them constituted a common struggle for the victory of the African democratic revolution and Africa's renaissance.

As an expression of this, throughout their existence the OAU and the AU have worked hard to define the content of this African national democratic revolution.

Africa's ruling elites have, over the decades, at least in formal collective resolutions, elaborated a common agenda that essentially binds the peoples of Africa to act together to define their future.

This common political, economic, social, and cultural agenda, in all its principal elements, represents a firm, credible, and realisable expression of the African democratic revolution around which all Africa should unite to achieve the fundamental aspirations of the African masses.

All popular insurrections, such as those that have engulfed the African Maghreb and Egypt, teach the masses many lessons they cannot learn from books.

These lessons generate energies that would otherwise lie dormant and give the ordinary people the confidence that they can and must be their own liberators.

This is happening in the African Maghreb and Egypt.

It will inevitably have an impact on the rest of Africa, serving as an example of what can be done.

It is not, however, a given that the popular uprisings will result in the reassertion of the national democratic revolution in Africa and therefore an advance towards the victory of the African Renaissance.

Today, the popular uprisings hold a learning opportunity for the people.

They provide the space for the African movement in favour of the African democratic revolution and the attendant African Renaissance.

This movement knows well that there are many powerful external forces convinced that Africa is directly and immediately relevant to their own exclusive interests, which do not necessarily have anything to do with the welfare and uplifting of the African people.

These players have already switched to "super-drive mode", seeking to influence the outcomes of the popular uprisings in their favour.

The African movement for the victory of the African democratic revolution and the African Renaissance must therefore engage the risen masses in the African Maghreb and Egypt, conscious that the successes of the revolution and the renaissance can be achieved only within the context of an intense global struggle that will determine the future of Africa for a large part of this century.

At the dawn of the 20th century, during the 1900 First Pan-African Congress in London, the Pan-Africanist WEB Du Bois, addressing the African challenges of the day, said: "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line."

The peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, supported by far-sighted people in Europe and North America, acted together successfully to address this "problem".

At the dawn of the 21st century, we said that as Africans we would ensure that this, the 21st, would be an African century.

The African movement for the victory of the African democratic revolution and the African Renaissance must act now to help ensure that the popular uprisings in the African Maghreb serve as a platform to accelerate the success of that revolution and renaissance.

These popular uprisings must succeed in their intention to renew the hopes of the African masses that their liberation from foreign rule also means their liberation from autocracy, hunger, poverty, ignorance, disease and dehumanisation.

Once more it is imperative to pose the question: Where are the African intelligentsia whose task it is to narrate accurately what is unfolding in the African Maghreb and Egypt – as a result of which narrative the continuing events may serve truly to advance the African national democratic revolution and therefore the African Renaissance?

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