

THE WORLD

## Is It Spring Again?

Don't look now, but a wave of youth-driven pro-democracy movements is having an impact across Africa.

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A protester jumps ahead of a marching crowd during a demonstration against ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria on Friday.

Ryad Kramdi/AFP/Getty Images

There is something going on across Africa. While the world's media has been focused on the U.S.–North Korea nuclear talks or the tumult in Venezuela, two of the world's longest-standing dictators decided to take a step back from forthcoming elections amid mass protests.

This marks what many believe to be a new era in two large and geopolitically important countries. The protests surprised the international community and observers of Algerian and Sudanese politics, as the countries had largely avoided the mass rallies held across the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring in 2011.

The people of Sudan took charge against their war criminal president in December, in a protest sparked by fuel price hikes that soon became nationwide movement for Bashir to step down. Employing street demonstrations, graffiti, and social media under the leadership of youth groups like Girifna and professional associations, Sudanese protesters achieved a unity that persevered in the face of crackdowns from security forces that have killed 57 people since December, according to Sudan's Doctors Syndicate. They successfully brought rural and conservative populations alongside urban and social media-savvy youth, while mobilizing an unprecedented number of women to participate. After trying everything to break up the protests, Bashir reshuffled the government and decided to step back from his plans to amend the constitution so he could run for another term in power.

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Then, in February, Algerian President Bouteflika's announcement that he would seek a fifth term as president sparked anger among Algerian citizens and initiated a grassroots movement in several cities after anonymous calls appeared on social media for people to protest. Protests were soon joined by thousands of students, professional organizations, and the mass participation of Algerian women. The protests occurred spontaneously and outside of the country's traditional political power structures. Despite a harsh response from security forces, the protests have achieved unexpected success. They grew in geography, numbers, and diversity, and were strategically followed by mass tactics of noncooperation like general strikes. They swayed parts of the military to abstain from oppression. Last week, Bouteflika was forced to announce that he will step down, but the announcement came with a muddled compromise of the scheduled April 18 elections being postponed. Though we can expect strikes and street protests to continue, this "buying" of time can be used by three dominant groups within the ruling elite—coalitions of parties around the former president, the business community and the military—to regroup and make sure their hand-picked candidate is the front-runner of the election. Even then,

popular demands for change are there to stay.

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While two oppressive leaders may be close to leaving power, it is still too early to celebrate. The recent history of the Arab world, from Egypt to Syria, proves that dictatorships are best viewed less as one individual occupying an office than a systemic disease that tends to be resistant to popular uprising efforts and finds new ways to survive, transform, and surprise even its own people with its cruelty and oppression.

But Algeria and Sudan seem to be only the tip of the iceberg—over the past several months, some of the longest-standing African autocracies have had their foundations shaken. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Joseph Kabila's reign of 18 years seems to be wobbling after his hand-picked candidate narrowly won the disputed elections. In Swaziland and Zimbabwe too, unlikely players—namely labor unions, civil society organizations, and professional associations—are shaking the status quo of Africa's last standing autocratic monarchy and ZANU-PF's four decades of rule, respectively.

For a decade and a half, our organization, CANVAS, has worked with pro-democracy groups in authoritarian countries. This research has concluded that three main elements lead to successful uprisings: the leading role of youth movements, unity and diversity, and long-term strategies not only to win but to consolidate the path to democracy.

Much has been written about the role of youth in mobilizing, organizing, and leading movements with large numbers, both in street protests and elections—all of which were crucial in our own Serbian nonviolent revolution against dictator Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. These strategies seem to have even more importance in Africa. Two more factors have been integral to the recent wave of uprisings across Africa: the relatively high proportion of youth, and high levels of unemployment.

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With proportionally high populations of young people (an astonishing 70 percent of Algeria's population are under the age of 30) youth movements like Sudan's Girifna or Algeria's Moutawana have been able to recruit an impressive portion of society. Furthermore, high levels of youth unemployment, about 30 percent in Algeria, have ironically empowered millennials, making them much more likely to take risks and stand up for what they believe in than the generations before them. Last, but not least, the use of technology by younger generations, similar to what was seen in the Arab Spring, has enabled them to see other movements worldwide and effectively mobilize and organize, playing a pivotal role in these



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The unity and diversity of those participating in popular movements is another key component to success. Not only have we seen geographical, educational, and economic diversity from popular movements in Sudan and Algeria, but also the unprecedented role of women's participation, a relatively new and thrilling phenomenon. However, whether the unity of youth groups, professional organizations, and political opposition parties will hold on through the period of the elections or if "last-minute opposition split" will give breeding air to ruling authoritarian elites (as happened right before elections in Congo) is yet to be seen.

Last but certainly not least in importance, recent history, from Ukraine in 2003 to Egypt in 2011, teaches us about the importance of "finishing what you start." Effectively expelling a dictator is an important achievement, but is there a plan for durable democracy? Can Algerians and the Sudanese find a way to navigate the challenging and bumpy road toward democracy if and after the ruling elite is defeated? Almost half of successful world "revolutions" do not end in smooth transitions from oppression to democracy and stability.

It is difficult to predict outcomes in Algeria or Sudan, but judging from the decades of authoritarian gloom in contemporary Africa, we may boldly say that lust for democracy seems to be growing among a youthful and restless population. As Desmond Tutu, one of the leaders of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, once wisely noted, "Once people decide to be free, nothing can stop them" 🇿🇦

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