People, Power, and Change: Analysing the Causes of Power Shifts in Africa Since the Cold War

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Abstract
This paper attempts to provide answers to the following questions: What are the causes of political changes in Africa in the 21st century? Are these changes people-led? What are the challenges militating against people-led political changes in Africa? The paper takes a look at the nature of the post-colonial states of Africa since the Cold War with the view to unearthing the emerging nature of power shifts in Africa. It analyses the causes, nature, and consequences of political change(s) especially since the end of the Cold War.
Key Words: power shifts, political change, social movement, political violence, Cold War
Introduction

The 21st century has brought some drastic and dramatic changes in the political landscapes in African states. These states have some of the highest representation of women in national parliaments in the world today with post-conflict Rwanda having about 64 percent [1]. In addition, at least seven African countries have had female heads of state or government with Mrs Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf becoming the first elected woman president in Africa in 2005. Many countries have seen incumbents lose democratically-conducted elections in Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Benin Republic, and the likes. Mugabe’s nearly four decades old regime came to an end in November 2017 without bloodshed against all predictions. There are mounting pressures on presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Biya of Cameroon who has both spent about three decades in power. As against Collier’s prediction that armed conflicts in Africa are always “nasty, brutish, and long” [2 p.7], conflicts in Africa (with the exceptions of Somalia and South Sudan) have ended in peaceful resolutions. Africa has also shown that peaceful political transitions are, in fact, possible with post-election crises in Ivory Coast and the Gambia resolved quickly thereby preventing violent conflicts. This leads us to the question of the role of the people’s or mass-led movement in all these.
Due to their influential activities in political mobilisation and participation, civic or mass-led movements have become a well-established topic of research in political science [3]. Their roles in the diffusion, especially with the influence of the social media, have seen the increased and continuous questioning and in some cases, bringing down authoritarian and autocratic regimes in Africa in the past decade. However, the debate is still on as to whether these protests are citizens-led or elite-led for them to make these political impacts.

The past three decades have seen four cross-national waves of anti-regime mobilization in different regions of the world: 1) popular opposition and regime change in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, 2) the spread of popular challenges to communist party rule that occurred in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from 1989–1991, 3) the “colour” revolutions of post-communist Europe and Eurasia 1996–2005, and finally 4) the protests between 2010 and 2014, which erupted in thousands of cities in over one hundred countries around the world [4]. Further, isolated cases of popular anti-authoritarian protest include the Chinese Tiananmen Protests in 1989, the Indonesian Student Revolt in 1999, the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar in 2007, the Green Movement in Iran 2009 – 2010 and the Chilean students’ movement in 2011-2013. A cursory look at all these protests shows that they
are elite-driven contrary to what some scholars [5 p.2] have earlier maintained.

As against Skocpol’s classical “social revolution” [6] in his study of revolutions in three countries- France, Russia, and China- scholars [7] have maintained that authoritarian regimes will hardly permit organised public protests that will lead to the citizens questioning its legitimacy will be rare, spontaneous, and largely uncoordinated. In that case, it will become so difficult for the citizens or the masses to pose a serious threat to the authoritarian regimes except they have some support from a faction of the political elite either in the military [8] or ruling party [9]. In any case, this has been the focus of existing scholarship in political science [10]. In my case, I look at the possibility of exploring or expanding the factors that cause or promote power shifts under the peculiar conditions in Africa.

The Idea of Political Change

Changes take place every day in our lives. We change our minds about what to eat; the clothes to wear; the direction we take to work, or even change our jobs. In some cases, we do our best to change an unfavourable government policy or disrupt the system. Whenever these actions or disruptions causes significant alterations in government, public policies, or political consciousness among the populace, it is often called political change.
But defining it is not as simple as we have said above. Because it is one of the most misunderstood and overused terms in political science. The world has witnessed great empires, political or ideological systems either imploding or exploding. Technology is fast changing political landscapes of several societies either from monarchy to republicanism or from authoritarianism to democracy.

Politicians in all parts of the world understand the importance of language in politics [11 p.71]. The Nigerian 2015 presidential election was largely a contest between the words “Change” and “Transformation”. During elections, opposition politicians resort to the use of “Change” in their bid to unseat incumbents. The exploitation of the word “Change” for political purposes, sometimes makes the idea controversial.

Before we go on to define the concept, we must note the following points: First, political systems and landscapes are always changing. There were times in Africa when it was inconceivable for opposition to unseat incumbents in elections. There were times, also, when the military was the direct opposition to the government in power. Apartheid rule in South Africa has given way to “majority rule” since 1994, something considered a sacrilege in the 1960s and 1970s. Technology and social media are now playing influential roles in shaping political discuss in Africa. The shifts towards
democracy and democratization are on track but suffer from several detours. Women are playing more prominent roles in Africa today than they were decades ago.

Second, political change is either intended or unintended. Political change is a broad concept that includes revolution, regime change, policy change, increase in youth and women participation in politics and the likes. Therefore, the kind of change a society seeks depends on her level of development. African societies may seek to give up “undemocratic” monarchical forms of government to multi-party democracy. On the other hand, Asian societies may seek democracy through cultural re-orientation and transformation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many African nationalist leaders were united in their bid to stamp out colonial rule. For many of them, like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, it was “Seek ye first the political kingdom” [12] and they think “all these other things will be added unto you.” Ghana got independence in 1957 and energised other African nationalists to continue to demand independence.

Third, political change may often lead to unintended consequences. History of Africa shows that political change brings good and bad consequences. Nationalists leaders who fought against colonial rule appeared to have made
their countries worse off than they met it. The return to democracy after long years of military rule did not always bring “democratic dividends” to the people who were made to believe things will get better once the soldiers return to the barracks. The breakaway of South Sudan from Sudan did not come with the peace and better life it promised. Many Nigerians who celebrated “Change” of government after the 2015 presidential election got backlashes from those in favour of “Transformation”. Till date, there is still heated disagreement about the impacts (positive or negative) of the “Change” in Nigerian society.

Forth, some political changes matter than others. Increase in women or youth participation in politics may be taken for granted in many African societies but major constitutional reforms or regime changes may be considered “major”. While voting with technology is almost like an everyday reality in Western democracies, electronic voting is still viewed with suspicion in Nigeria with fears of rigging and distrust for electoral institutions being so strong.

After looking at all these, we can see political change as the transformation of political systems, structures, institutions, values, objects, actors or processes over a period of time. Some scholars [13 p:9] see political change as essentially caused by economic factors while others argued it is caused by
other reasons like social conflicts, political culture and prevalent political ideas [14 p. 441]. Scholars like Felix Kolb [15], for example, defines it as “outcomes that are related to the state and changes in its policies, politics, and polity.”

Although Kolb [16]’s definition extends the concept of political change beyond just institutional or policy changes, it excludes non-institutional changes like changes in public opinion or public political consciousness that occur as a result of intense political activism, economic downturns, heavy social protest and the likes. The non-institutional political changes are also important because they can influence the way citizens perceive and interact with their political institutions, objects and actors. By fostering the development of a citizenry that is willing and able to claim a greater stake in politics, these non-institutional changes can transform the relationship between the state and society [17 p.30].

By changes in political consciousness, we mean “ongoing, dynamic process of constructing one’s understanding of, and relationship to,” [18 p.7] the political world.

**Political Change in Africa Since the Cold War**

Aside colonialism, the Cold War has influenced African politics than any other thing. The internal affairs of most, if not all, African states have been
shaped by the ideological conflicts between the United States and USSR, the two key warriors in the Cold War. This may be because many African countries gained independence in the peak of the Cold War 1960s and 1970s which looks like an opportunity for the superpowers to increase their spheres of influence. Due to their fragile, vulnerable, and volatile nature, many African countries looked up to some superpowers for their leaders to consolidate their powers [19 p.126].

The intense search for spheres of influence created the quest for African clients the superpowers support and sustain many undemocratic regimes. In turn, these regimes in their increasing level of unpopularity resorted to brute force, violence, intimidation, and in many cases, the assassination of the opponents of the regimes. Civil society organisations, opposition political parties and groups were outlawed as these regimes hoped to strengthen their grips on power relying heavily on their superpower allies.

During this period, African states began to take multiple personalities partly manifesting characters of their own and those of their ex-colonial masters. This identity crisis occurring as a result of the multiple personality syndromes soon reveal they have inherited state institutions which they barely understand. They were understandably fragile, and in some cases, economically unviable. The fragilities in these states soon became obvious
and were exposed to several lights: Newly-independent Congo soon became caught up in a long and bloody conflict in which approximately 5 million people have died as a direct or indirect consequence of the conflict, making this the bloodiest war since the Second World War [20]; Egypt and Togo were soon to witness military coups and these became a fashion in virtually all African countries; series of events led to the collapse of democratic institutions in 1966 and subsequently, a bitter Nigerian Civil War; bloody wars of liberation took place in Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe and many others; and Liberia and Sierra Leone will later endure long and bloody ethnic conflicts.

With more African countries gaining independence, former nationalist movements took over state institutions in their respective countries. These nationalist parties soon became dictatorial, ruthless, and corrupt [21] in their bid to stay in power. The soldiers that have earlier accused politicians of corruption, mismanagement, maladministration, and fraud soon became a reincarnation of the vices they claimed to correct when they took over in the first instance [22]. Many nationalist parties have become so synonymous with their countries’ liberation that their leaders find it difficult for them to be defeated. The nationalist leaders having seen the perquisites of state power did not wish to leave office or function on a multi-party basis allowing
for free and fair elections in their realms. Leaders like Algerian Marxist
Socialist President Ahmed Ben Bella who himself fought fiercely against the
French in his bid to “liberate” his country, soon became ruthless and
dictatorial. He outlawed all opposition to his newly-formed regime in 1961.
His regime was overthrown in 1965 by a military coup. This same fate befell
many of such leaders at the time.
In the 1980s, there was only one case, Mauritius, of peaceful democratic
transition of power in sub-Saharan Africa. Aside from that, dictators reign
supreme in African capitals with little or no effort to relinquish power
anytime soon. Those who succumbed to pressures of leaving office peacefully
hurriedly conducted sham elections to legitimize their “anointed” candidates
as successors from their own parties to guarantee them peaceful retirements
[23].
The Cold War finally ended in 1991 with the collapse of the former Soviet
Union and the Berlin Wall. These also have had their consequences on the
changing patterns of African politics.
The end of the Cold War came with increased democratisation, competitive
elections, multiparty democracy, the decline of the communist ideology and
parties in Africa and the increase in the demands for human rights, social
justice, and liberal democracy. In Zambian 1991 presidential election,
Marxist leader, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, and his party the United National Independence Party (UNIP) lost to Frederick Chiluba’s Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD).

Between 1991 and 1996, there were 20 changes in governments and parties in power in 12 sub-Saharan Africa countries [24]. The 1980s and 1990s also saw increased popular oppositions to military regimes in several African countries and the demands for transitions to democratic rule. The Apartheid regimes in South Africa began to collapse as majority parties took over in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa effectively ending several years of violent strife.

Between 1989 and 1997, about three out of every four African countries had adopted multiparty elections [25 p.11]. Said Adejumobi [26] observed four noticeable patterns in the democratization wave in Africa in the 1990s which include: first, the rising influence and demands of civil society and human right organisations for democracy on the political elites which the later concede to; second, the rising number of state-coopted civil society and human right groups who also demands change and democratization from the political elites; third, the declining motivations for the state to resort to violence to crush popular oppositions hence decides on its own to transition to multiparty elections; and fourth, the waves of state-sponsored social
conflict deliberately created to derail political transitions like the case of abandoned Nigeria’s Third Republic. In the four cases highlighted above, except when civil society is able to exert itself and force the state to concede, the transition to democracy resulted in cosmetic exercises for the military ruling classes to gain legitimacy. Many of the political elites who decided to adopt democracy did so tactically to avoid full reform programs [27]. As a result, many African countries had what we can call cosmetic civil rule as a result of the incomplete transition. In this case, we have civilian institutions but in reality, weak states which are degrading quickly [28]. Furthermore, the so-called transitions left executive powers unaffected or in many cases, stronger [29]. Today, what most African countries experience can at best be described as “hyperpresidentialism”, in which executive powers of the President dwarfs all other organs of government [30].

As the millennium winds down, many African countries either fully or partially succumbed to the pressures from civil societies, human right groups or international organisations. President Quett Masire of Botswana stepped down voluntarily in 1998 after ruling the country for 18 years. He handed over to his deputy, Festus Mogae. The political transition programme that started finally led to the handover of power to civilians in 1999 in Africa’s most populous country, Nigeria. The soldiers were down but not out yet. One
of them, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, was elected as President even though he himself was military head of state between 1976 and 1979. Many generals who served in the late General Sanni Abacha and wanted him to continue under a dubious transition programme earlier in 1995 have formed their own party, All Peoples Party (APP).

As a result of the experiences of many years of military dictatorship, the seemingly antagonistic relationship between the civil society and the state, heavy rigging of elections, weak democratic institutions, it was clear that the newly-elected post-military civilian administrations have not given up their military instincts of violence. Elections are rigged in favour of the ruling parties with reckless abandon. In some other cases, election results are nullified as it was the case of Yahya Jammeh who lost his bid to be re-elected President of The Gambia in December 2016 but chose to annul it citing “some irregularities” after initially congratulating the winner, Adama Barrow. In some cases, institutions are manipulated to do the biddings of the parties in power. Court Judges who refused to do the biddings of the ruling parties are either sacked, molested, cajoled, blackmailed, or intimidated into submission. Opposition leaders are arrested, intimidated or assassinated in the case of Ivory Coast in the early 2000s. Opposition parties, civil societies, are bribed with promises of “juicy appointments” in government. Since many
opposition parties are often weak financially and lacking in funding to compete favourably with their ruling rivals who have unfettered access to state funds, the offer to partake in the “national cake” is too tempting to ignore [31 p.162-3]. This was the case of the deal-making under the guise of National Unity Government which opposition leaders were allocated some “juicy” positions like prime minister or some senior ministers in government in Kenya (after the 2007 elections), Zimbabwe (after the 2008 elections) or Nigeria (after the 2007 election) [32].

Having shown that much progress, the question of who or what directs these changes then arise. Some [33] have argued that the change is “mainly coming from citizens themselves. Maybe they have just lost patience with corrupt dictators.” While, as some scholars [34, 35, and 36] might have argued that those “who take part in civil disobedience or political violence are discontented about something” within African contexts especially, it is difficult to show that any protests or political mobilisation can take place effectively without the support of some members of the political elite who may either subtly provide the resources for the organisation or overtly being part of the movement. The weakness in this theory is that it tends to reduce collective actions to individual behaviours which are not always the case. These theorists may argue that the resignation of Mugabe’s Zimbabwean
president deals primarily with the “anger” of the people against his regime, but in fact, the opposite may be the case. The swearing-in of his former deputy, with whom he earlier had a political disagreement, who has been in power with him for 37 years shows that the movement was primarily elite-based. It is difficult to prove that the pockets of protests against him on social media by the youths could have accounted for his fall. At least, their expressions of these “anger” did not transform into meaningful political actions that immediately threaten the regime until his disagreement with his erstwhile deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, became public. We, can, as in the Arab Spring, grant that “the wider availability of information about what corrupt leaders are–and are not–doing, and awareness of what is happening in neighbouring countries, looks like a growing factor.” [37].

As we have seen above, political changes that have taken place either through military coups or elections, there have been significant contributions civil society organisations, pressure groups or interest groups directly or indirectly connected to political elites. In the next section, we shall be looking at some more specific instances of elite-led movements.

**Discussions: Accounting for Power Shifts**

In our review of power shifts in Africa, we noticed that there are some recurrent themes which include: regime changes, improved women and
youth participation in politics, decline in post-election violence, and relatively improved confidence in electoral democracy. In this section, we shall be taking a look at the key factors underpinning these themes.

Cultural Changes

Africa comprises societies that are firmly rooted in strong tradition and cultures dating back to pre-colonial times [38]. Incremental changes in these cultural beliefs, especially in technology, have had lasting impacts on her political life. These “Incremental changes” are what Frazier [39 p.31] sees as including technology, customs, habits, values and resulting personality.

With significant “culture contacts” [40] much of other cultures have been incorporated into Africa societies. This was what led Linton [41] to contend that diffusion of cultures creates changes as a result of the rippling effects of the changes taking place in other lands. There were strong indications that the military coup in Egypt in the 1950s provides the wave of the fashionable trend of military coups that swept through Africa, and in West Africa through Togo.

Also, we can argue that the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe that led to democratization provided a strong impetus for the demands by African intellectuals for liberal democracy. We can also justify the earthquake of democratic transitions through the ballot box especially in West Africa with
the Senegalese and Ivory Coast elections in 2012 where opposition candidates became victorious.

When The Gambia president, Yahya Jammeh refused to step down peacefully after losing the country’s presidential election in November 2016, West African leaders under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) quickly intervened to avoid bloodshed which may spread quickly to neighbouring states through Senegal. It was also possible that, had the leaders not intervened early enough, such practice may soon become the fashion in the sub-region with Ghana election just a few months away.

Another aspect of changing cultural patterns in Africa is in the increasing influence of social media.

Technology is an aspect of culture just like customs, habits, and values. So, any change(s) in technological innovations automatically brings about changes in political culture in societies. Political culture itself is a subset of national or subnational culture. Technology is part of a culture. Technological changes bring about changes in political culture and political consciousness [42].

Social media, a recent invention in the world, is fast becoming an essential source of civic activism and engagement. This is why it must be studied for its own uniqueness. It functions through its platform comprising of
Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social websites. It got the influence to transform the methods through which political as well as social activities are prepared and implemented.

Political landscapes are fast changing in several places thanks to the influence of social media. The earthquake of political changes brought about by the “Arab Spring” explains the changing nature of protests and political activism brought about by social media [43].

Inspired by the Arab Spring mobilisations, Nigerian citizens organised themselves for a showdown with the government in January 2012 over the rumour gaining grounds that it was launching a full-fledged deregulation of the downstream sector of the economy. This led to a series of a week-long protest against neo-liberal reforms in the country.

While it is still disputable how as to whether social media and not, other factors are responsible for the changes brought about by online activism, the role of social media in political mobilisation is still being studied by scholars.

Going through developments in Zimbabwe, it is highly contestable as to the influence of hashtags on the power shift in November [44].

In Nigeria for instance, the attraction of the youths to social media has been one of the key strategies for youth groups to mobilise them for political participation and engagement. These have brought significant results. The
#NotTooYoungToRun and #OccupyNigeria movements are social media initiatives which heavily attracted youths to the need to get involved in politics in Nigeria.

**Changes in Demography**

Population patterns have the capacity to transform societies. There appear to be profound changes taking place in African population today. According to an AU [45] report, *State of Africa’s Population*, the population pyramids of the various regions of Africa generally show that Africa’s population is largely young and one of the youngest in the world. The report claims that about 40% of Africa’s population is under 15 years an average for all its sub-regions [46]. Also, according to UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in its 2014 report, claims that “Africa is a continent of young people with 65 percent of the population below the age of 35 and nearly 50 percent under the age of 19.”

Also, according to World Bank data cited in UN Population Fund report [47] shows that African children have ‘higher poverty rates than adults in the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with more than half of children living in conditions of extreme poverty. In many countries, access to and quality of education remains low. According to UNESCO, 22 million of the 69 million eligible adolescents in the world that did not attend secondary
school in 2011 lived in sub-Saharan Africa. 35.89% of adolescent girls are not in secondary school in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 7.39 in Latin America and the Caribbean. While 30% of youth aged 15 to 24 worldwide were considered “digital natives” in 2012 (five or more years of online experience), under 10% qualified at this level in sub-Saharan Africa.

Looking at the data above, we can see that the youthfulness of African population which has been negatively affected by the disease, poverty, hunger, migration in search of greener pastures, unemployment and the likes have the potentials to ensure power shifts. These may also be exploited by some members of the elite for some political advantages.

*The Role of Ideas*

African societies are no strangers to the power of ideas. Many of her early nationalists have travelled to study in Europe and America and have imported some of their ideas. Weber [48] argued that the development in Western Europe was largely due to the influence of ideas of work ethics introduced by early Protestants.

The intellectual ideas of Frantz Fanon especially his *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* reportedly influenced anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Latin America in the 1960s, 1970s and in Southern Africa in 1980s and 1990s.
University students across Africa played key roles in the demands for the return to democracy; campaign against human right abuses; decolonisation; an end to dictatorships. The National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) in collaboration with civil society organisations were at the forefront of the campaign to return to democracy in the 1990s [49].

**Changing Frequencies of Violent Conflicts**

The word “conflict” appears to have become synonymous with Africa as used by Western scholars. Some scholars like Collier [50] have raised concerns that Africans “might die in one” conflict or the other. But contrary to Collier and theorists of his school of thought, evidence shows that wars are on the decline in Africa and there are great prospects for peace since the 2000s (51, 52, 53, and 54].

As against many expectations, there were peaceful political transitions in The Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin Republic, Zimbabwe, and several other countries where incumbents were defeated. Even though there were serious concerns over tenure elongations in Burundi, Uganda and Rwanda in 2016, post-election conflicts were either short-lived or largely averted. It is still uncertain if the post-election tensions in Kenya will degenerate into full-blown ethnic conflicts between the Luos and Kikuyus. All these show that these countries are achieving high degrees of stability.
Conclusion

So far, we have looked at power shifts in Africa and how they came about. Looking at the patterns of the power shifts, it is clear that they have been elite-led, rather than people-led. The challenges to the achievement of a people-led movement for power shifts can be traceable to the nature of the state which lacks civil society orientations.

As the recent case of Zimbabwe shows, power shifts have been led by the political elites with the support of the people. This should have been the other way round.

If the current tempo is sustained in the digital age, the prospect of having a youth or people-led movement to achieve power shift in the nearest future is bright.
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