

INTERVENTION

INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

PUBLIC ACTION AND CITIZEN MOBILIZATIONS IN AFRICA

On May 23 and 24, 2024, the *Institut de recherche pour le développement* (IRD) in Ivory Coast and the *Fondation de l'Innovation pour la Démocratie* (FIDEMO) organized an international colloquium in Yamoussoukro entitled "Public action and citizen mobilization in Africa". The event brought together over 65 scientists and activists from three continents (Africa, North America and Europe). The director of *Fondemos* was able to take part in the event with a speech on the topic of:

« A mixed record (for the time being): examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Cameroon, Senegal and Guinea ».





n the democratic front, there has recently been more blocking, involution and even backtracking than progress in terms of the representativeness of citizens, whether on the African continent or elsewhere. Recent events in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are a reminder of this, as are those in the United States: unfortunately, Tocqueville was not wrong.

In several democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the French-speaking part, the institutions seem to be at a standstill, and the resilient citizens do not always put enough pressure on those who run them to hope for improved governance. So, despite all the talk of 'Africa will be the new China'[1], of an emerging middle class, of the demographic dividend, etc., you only have to step outside the upper echelons of African capitals to realise that there is a problem with economic governance in many countries, because there is not enough accountability: leaders do not feel obliged to be accountable to their citizens, to be transparent and responsible.

However, it is also true that nothing can happen without citizens: the destinies of African citizens cannot be decided without them. If they are aware, and therefore mobilised, they can stand up to external financial powers, markets and international institutions, and above all they can demand transparency and honesty from

their leaders. Nothing can be achieved in the long term without the people, or behind their backs, as the examples below demonstrate.

Allow me to quote Richard Banégas, who was my professor at the Sorbonne in the early 2000s, when Paris 1 inaugurated a Masters in 'African Studies'. He said: *'Since 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, new citizens' movements have sprung up, such as Y en a marre in Senegal, Balai citoyen in Burkina Faso, Togo debout, FNDC in Guinea, Filimbi and Lucha in the DRC, Walk to Work in Uganda, EndSars in Nigeria, Hirak in Algeria, E Muito in Angola and the various components of the Tournons la page coalition in Niger, Gabon and elsewhere. These movements have joined forces to oppose electoral manipulation and demand compliance with constitutional rules, first and foremost presidential term limits. They are innovating in terms of the way they are organised, which is more horizontal, the way they mobilise the masses and the way they intervene in the city.'*

These hopeful movements are a reminder of the potential power of civil society when spurred on by organised and charismatic leaders, such as Boby Wine in Uganda or Luaty Beirão in Angola, two musicians who have become activists and agents of change in their respective countries... but there's still a long way to go : the Arab revolutions in 2011 did not spark off similar movements in sub-Saharan Africa, nor

1 <https://www.ft.com/content/8ead516a-6b3e-11e9-a9a5-351eeaf6d84>

were the economic and social tensions and confinement caused by Covid the drop in the ocean we had hoped would bring down old dictators who had been in power for decades and were cut off from the realities of their people, like Sassou Nguesso in Congo-Brazza or the Bongo family in Gabon (it was a coup d'état several years later that brought down the latter).

The aim of the NGO Fondemos^[2] is to act in support of civil society movements that are trying to advance political freedoms in their respective countries. The aim is to advocate on their behalf in Paris and Brussels, to help them with money and equipment as far as resources allow, and above all to pass on potentially successful methods found elsewhere, to share good practice, in particular through training courses produced for this purpose, presented in situ or online and then made available (for example: 'how to conduct a citizen election observation mission', "how to improve militant mobilisation and keep the movement alive", "how to look after public relations", "how to use international law", "how to protect communications and data", "how to conduct peaceful demonstrations", "how to manage the democratic transition", "how to draw up a programme", etc.).

Fondemos, for example, is involved in supporting civil society in the DRC, where the fact that Kabila junior was forced to renounce the presidency in 2018 is certain-

ly a step forward, but he managed to place his candidate, Tshisekedi (who then permanently removed him from the affairs of state): there is still a long way to go.

Fondemos is also active in supporting civil society in Chad, where the young Déby does not seem determined to open up the authoritarian power inherited from his father. The words of Professor Akindès, *'tears and blood as materials for building democracy, with freedom as the ideal'*, resonate strongly in the Chadian context, where 300 young pro-democracy civil society activists were killed by Chadian security forces in October 2022.

Finally, Fondemos is acting in support of civil society in Cameroon, in particular the 'Solidarité Jeunes' movement, which was born in 2024 out of the desire of young Cameroonians to become a catalyst for the emergence of new social forces in their country and which reminds us that *'confidence, courage and determination are values that we must cultivate if we want to succeed in our objectives, i.e. the mobilisation of young people and the implementation of well-structured non-violent actions'*. They also say that they are not preparing for the next elections, i.e. 2025 (when Paul Biya will be 92 years old), but for the following ones, because they know that awareness-raising and repoliticisation take time.

There is still a long way to go, but two recent, hopeful examples remind us that

² www.fondemos.com

the worst is never certain:

Firstly, in Senegal, where the political context for the 2024 presidential elections was tense, with virulent popular demonstrations, a violent police response, the main opponent in prison, and a postponement of the election (initially scheduled for February)... but all this paradoxically increased voters' determination to participate in the democratic process, and the anger and desire for change translated into a vote-sanction against the outgoing regime, embodied by Macky Sall and his candidate Amadou Ba.

Senegal is, along with Côte d'Ivoire, one of the richest countries in the sub-region; as a result, the middle class is larger than in neighbouring countries; as a result, Senegalese civil society is more developed and more active, and was able to play a watchdog role during these elections, ensuring the transparency and security of the electoral process. Thousands of domestic observers were deployed to oversee the polls, guaranteeing the credibility of the results.

To cite two organisations in the front line:

- *"Aar Sunu Election"*, which means *"Let's protect our election"* in Wolof, which was very active;
- the *"F24"* coalition, 150 political parties and civil society organisations that mobilised to protest against the postponement of the election.

Civil society and Senegalese citizens thus played a crucial role in ensuring that the electoral deadline was met. The massive mobilisation of young people was particularly decisive, marking a historic turning point in the country's electoral dynamics: *'we who work on electoral sociology always come to the strong conclusion that young people don't vote. This time, however, the massive participation of young people was salutary: they voted en masse and helped to secure the vote[3]'*.

The explosion that destroyed Conakry's main oil depot at the end of 2023, in addition to causing major loss of life, caused an oil supply crisis and a sharp rise in inflation, dragging the country even deeper into a pre-existing economic crisis. Inflation, dragging the country deeper into a pre-existing economic crisis. The fact that food prices were virtually uncontrolled exacerbated the consequences for the population. And despite a protocol signed at the end of January 2024 between the junta and players in the economic sector to impose price ceilings on certain primary products, the average price of these commodities has nevertheless risen.

So the popular discontent was there, all that remained was to frame it, in other words to give shape and organisation to the movement... which was also lacking the spark.

³ Alassane Bèye, researcher in political science

The protest movement was triggered by the arrest of Sékou Jamal Pendessa, a Guinean journalist and trade unionist, on 19 January 2024. He had organised a demonstration entitled 'Human Unrest in Conakry', to protest against the restriction of internet access and, more generally, the repression of the so-called 'transitional' authorities (a long transition, incidentally, since they have been in power since the coup d'état of 5th of September 2021).

In short, there were specific demands for greater political transparency in the country, an end to the authoritarian way in which power is managed, and effective public policies to combat inflation and the economic crisis in general. The protest movement was triggered by the arrest of Sékou Jamal Pendessa, a Guinean journalist and trade unionist, on the 19th of January 2024. He had organised a demonstration entitled 'Déferlement humain sur Conakry', to protest against the restriction of internet access and, more generally, the repression of the so-called 'transitional' authorities (a long transition, incidentally, since they have been in power since the coup d'état of the 5th of September 2021).

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So, traditionally, what started out as a dis-

-content with the economic situation has spilled over into the political sphere (as when, in one country or another, a rise in the price of petroleum products leads to an increase in the cost of transport, and therefore of rice, and therefore to food riots, or as when the price of wheat and therefore of bread was the triggering factor for the French Revolution in 1789, or as when in 2018 a rise in the price of oil gave rise to the yellow waistcoats. ... which have also moved from a demand for purchasing power to political demands, such as a referendum on popular initiative, etc.).

On the 22nd of January 2024, trade unionist and journalist Sékou Jamal Pendessa was charged with '*taking part in an unauthorised demonstration on the public highway and publishing information likely to disturb public security and order*', and was remanded to Conakry prison.

On the 19th of February 2024, the junta announced by decree the dissolution of the transitional government and ordered the freezing of the bank accounts of members of the government, and even the confiscation of their passports... but it was a little late to put out the fire, and the 26th of February 2024 marked the start of a general protest movement led by the country's thirteen trade union centres, supported by the main parties and civil society organisations.

This unity was the key to victory: for three shops, banks and schools remained closed

across a large part of the country, and the administration was paralysed.

The ruling military had never before been faced with a movement on such a scale, involving the entire Guinean population. With the junta banning rallies and demonstrations, the general protest turned into a complete shutdown of the country when the trade unions simply asked workers to stay at home. Spontaneous demonstrations nevertheless took place in the north of Conakry, resulting in two deaths and more than a dozen injured, the general strike lasted three days and ended on the 28th of February, 2024, following the release of Sékou Jamal Pendessa, a condition deemed a prerequisite for any discussions.

Faced with this unprecedented social movement, the junta was forced to yield.

For Sékou Jamal Pendessa, his release represents *"a victory for democracy, for justice against injustice, for justice against arbitrariness. The fight against dictatorship continues, and we will intensify our efforts to show the authorities that they do not hold the right of life and death over the population."*

It is, therefore, fair to conclude that, without resorting to violence, this general strike serves as a compelling example of the effectiveness of civil society movements. In a country where freedom of speech is stifled, and opposition is repressed, unified coordination and opposition to the junta can drive progress.

