

# SESSION 5

LESSONS LEARNED-YOUTH AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE; A FOCUS ON NORTH AFRICA

This year, Africa has taken centre stage on every news platform for all the right reasons.

Denied the opportunity for 'real' democracy and basic human right opportunities, our North African brothers in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have taken matters into their own hands. We watched as millions of citizens from these countries stood up to the powers that be and demanded a new form of governance for themselves.

These protests have in some cases led to the toppling of long standing African leaders and rising fear in neighbouring countries where similar forms of unrest are beginning to raise to the surface

In North Africa, about two-thirds of the population is under 30, the highest percentage of young people in the world. The average age in [Egypt](#) is 25 and it's 24 in [Libya](#). High youth unemployment creates fervent desire for change

and electronic media provide a way to organize, a tinderbox waiting for a spark to set it off.

[Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) warned the region's foundations were sinking into the sand. The spark occurred when a young Tunisian man who set himself on fire to express his frustration with not being able to make a living and with corruption. It's called the Arab Spring and the Youth Revolution, similar to a democratic uprising in Latin America 20 years earlier. A reminder that history includes ideological revolutions that are more than regime change including 1789 in the US, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Nasser's Revolution of 1952, Cuba in 1959, and Iran in 1979.

Before the youth revolutions started in 2011, a Muslim preacher who rejects extremism, Amr Khaled warned, "Arab and Muslim youth need to be listened to. [\[i\]](#) No one listens to them. They have dreams. We need to bring out those dreams," but governments ignored their unrest over high unemployment and rising food prices.

The Arab slang word *hittistes* refers to those who lean against the wall, without work, many *hittistes* in a humiliated generation who need *wasta*—connections to someone with power or bribes—to get a job. Getting married requires a good job to pay for a wedding, feasts, dowry, and a place to live, clearly a frustrating situation for unemployed young people. For example, 30% of Libyans were unemployed and the average Egyptian income was \$2,007. A chart lists the unrest index, corruption, poverty, average age and literacy rates in [Middle Eastern countries](#).<sup>[ii]</sup>

If you followed the news about revolution in Egypt, it would seem a single self-immolation protest on December 17 by fruit seller Mohamed Bouzzizi (age 26) caused youth demonstrations in Tunisia after he died in early January. Protests spread around the country, resulting in the resignation of the dictator Ben Ali in January 2011 after 23 years in power. Around 100 protesters were killed.<sup>[iii]</sup> The youth revolution leapfrogged via Twitter, the Internet, Al Jazeera TV and rap music to Egypt, the most populated country in the North Africa. Only 18 days of demonstrations organized by young people led to

the 30-year reign of [Hosni Mubarak](#) in February, momentous events like the American and French Revolutions, the [fall of the Berlin Wall](#) and the break up of the USSR in 1989.

Demonstrations spread calling for local days of rage in Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya and Syria where autocrats have ruled for many decades (the prize for longest rule goes to Libyan Muammar [Khadafy](#) or Gaddafi who ruled Libya for 42 years, since 1969). The anthem of the young protesters is a song by a Tunisian rapper, “Mr. President, your people are dying/ People are eating rubbish/ Look at what is happening/ Miseries everywhere, Mr. President/ I talk with no fear/ Although I know I will get only trouble/ I see injustice everywhere.”<sup>[iv]</sup> Protesters demand the end of decades of emergency rule and corruption, honest elections, affordable food, and jobs. Yemen was the only place where someone called for an Islamic state, rather than democracy

Governments responded in a positive way by changing government leaders, ending decades of emergency rule, making changes to the constitution, and giving cash grants or lowering

food costs. Or they use force, arresting demonstrators, blaming and roughing up foreign media (In Libya autocrat Khadafy blamed young rebels given psychedelic drugs in their drinks by Islamic extremists), cutting off access to Internet and mobile phones, or military force with water cannon and tear gas, rubber or real bullets that killed hundreds of young demonstrators (365 in Egypt) and thousands in Libya. They set tribes against each other and bribe tribal leaders, in Libya. The Arab League's 22 members normally oppose foreign intervention, but they asked the UN Security Council to impose a non-fly zone over Libya. Khadafy responded, "If the world is crazy, we will be crazy too."

In Libya, Mummar el-Qaddafi blamed young people for the bloody uprising, saying they were led astray by Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida, and "hallucinogenic pills in their coffee with milk, like Nescafe." On February 24 he said on TV, "No one above the age of 20 would actually take part in these events. They are taking advantage of the young age of these people [to commit violent acts] because they are not legally liable." [\[viii\]](#) He urged parents to "come out of your houses and

talk to your sons.” He responded with mercenaries and machine guns, killing thousands of people. A defector to the rebels, the commander of the military’s special operations forces, General Abdul Salam Mahoom al-Hassi, told Al Jazeera news, “I place all of my resolve and capabilities at the service of the youth revolution.”[\[ix\]](#) After vowing to go to door to door to crush rebels, the UN Security Council voted on March 18 to protect civilians and Gaddafi called a cease-fire.

But what do you think?

Are there embedded lessons for Nigerian within the recent North African political uprising? What are these lessons? Should such protests be repeated here? What benefits would that bring? Or are the lessons instead for our future political leaders?