

# **Youth, Technology, and the Arab Spring: Is Sub-Saharan Africa Next?**

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## **Abstract**

*Youth and technology have frequently been cited as factors that contributed to the so-called "Arab Spring" uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Although few of the uprisings have led to significant positive change, they have nevertheless been disruptive. It is therefore worthwhile to consider the possibility of similar protest contagion in other regions. Sub-Saharan Africa is a region with a large youth population, increasing access to the Internet and mobile phone use, and many countries with few political rights and/or civil liberties. International media sources have thus repeatedly asked whether Sub-Saharan Africa will experience its own version of the Arab Spring.*

*This paper first discusses the role that social media played in the Arab Spring uprisings; mobile phones and the Internet are discussed to the extent that they enable social media and regime repression. This paper then briefly examines how youth circumstances influenced the uprisings, specifically in terms of youth and graduate unemployment. Statistics are subsequently presented to compare and contrast youth circumstances and*

*technology use in the two regions. Ultimately, this paper argues that the Arab Spring case does not portend a similar protest contagion for Sub-Saharan Africa due to important differences between youth's circumstances and technology use in the two regions.*

## **Introduction**

When Tunisian fruit vendor Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in late 2010, his actions seemed to ignite a larger conflagration throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In 2011, a string of protests, revolutions, economic crises, and civil wars occurred in countries from Tunisia to the Gulf States that collectively became known as the “Arab Spring.”<sup>2</sup> Observers have gone as far as to describe the global turbulence resulting therefrom as the greatest since the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Youth involvement and technology use were often mentioned in early reporting and subsequent analyses of the Arab Spring uprisings. Youth were often described as protest instigators; for example, a news report from March 2011 described “youth-led momentum for change” and “a transformation sweeping the Middle East, propelled by young people free of the fear that held back their parents.”<sup>4</sup> Middle East scholar Toby Matthiesen opines that it “seem[ed] as if Arabs, and indeed young people around the world, had been waiting for something to rally around.”<sup>5</sup> Youth, however, were not the sole story of the Arab Spring.

Media commentators and scholars also quickly and persistently pointed out how protesters used social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to organize, discuss, document, and frame or correct international media coverage of the events, leading to the monikers “Twitter Revolution”<sup>6</sup> and “Facebook Revolutions.”<sup>7</sup> Through such social media use, protesters not only shaped when, where, and how the protests occurred, but also shaped their own and the outside world’s understanding of the events. Widespread mobile phone use facilitated these phenomena, and satellite television served as another means of disseminating information throughout the

region. Social media use was often mentioned in tandem with youth, frequently in reference to the courageous acts of youth opposition toward authoritarian leaders that were disseminated around the world by both social and traditional media.<sup>8</sup> Ambivalent feelings of hope, uncertainty, inspiration, and anxiety also arose in some countries in Sub-Saharan

Africa (SSA) as the events of the Arab Spring unfolded.<sup>9</sup>

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Due to the geographic proximity and perceived socio-economic and political similarities between the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as well as an increasingly tech-savvy cohort of SSA youth, the international media has asked whether the events in MENA foretell similar

uprisings in Africa.<sup>10</sup> Perceived socio-economic similarities between the two regions include youth unemployment, some persistent authoritarian regimes, and government corruption. The question's recurrence in international media suggests the need for a deeper examination of the similarities and differences between the regions. However, a simultaneous comparison of all of these socio-economic factors across the two large regions is not only daunting, but also risks suffering from superficiality and/or overgeneralization as a result; a narrower focus is more beneficial. Accordingly, this essay considers whether the "youth/technology nexus" of the Arab Spring has implications for SSA, a region with a large youth population, increasing access to the Internet, social media, and mobile phones, and many countries with low levels of political rights and civil liberties.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, the youth/technology nexus generally refers to the collection of interactions between youth and technology, as when technologies facilitate the organization and documentation of protest activities by young activists. This requires both that technology be available and that youth have access to it. This essay will first discuss the reported role of social media in the Arab Spring. Mobile phones and the Internet will be discussed to the extent that they enable social media use

and regime repression.<sup>12</sup> This essay will then briefly discuss the role that youth circumstances played in the uprisings, specifically in terms of youth and graduate unemployment.<sup>13</sup> Next, it will draw on applicable statistics for SSA to compare and contrast the region with MENA in terms of youth and technology. Overall, evidence suggests that the Arab Spring case does not necessarily portend similar protest contagion for SSA due to important differences between the circumstances of youth and the characteristics of technology use in the two regions.

### **Technology and the Arab Spring**

Technology has played a central role in reporting on the Arab Spring. Scholars Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain note that technology was prominently featured in Western reports, even to the extent of obscuring other, more traditional, aspects of the protests.<sup>14</sup> While the technological landscape of the Arab Spring was likely necessary for the rapid contagion of uprisings, such a landscape should not be interpreted as a sufficient condition for either the Arab Spring or future uprisings.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the Arab Spring should be examined by means of what scholars Howard and Hussain term “causal conjoined explanations.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, this essay later looks at youth (specifically unemployment as a proxy of available opportunities and thus discontent) alongside technology, which together constitute the aforementioned youth/technology nexus.<sup>17</sup> This section examines the reported role of social media in the Arab Spring and a number of limitations and weaknesses in that discussion, including the heterogeneity of social media, the share of domestic versus international social media participants, and the ability of governments to use social media (and technology more broadly) to repress the public.

Journalist and free expression advocate Jillian C. York argues that not only do social media facilitate the discussion and analysis of the demonstrations, but also “hold a vital place in this media ecosystem, filling informational voids left by the still bridled state and traditional media” and provide context for and correction to international media reports.<sup>18</sup> She suggests that expanding Internet access and social media

use could promote free expression—and, in turn, democratization.<sup>19</sup> Freedom House, an independent organization monitoring rights around the world, similarly notes that social media (particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) is important for activism.<sup>20</sup>

A prominent example of the potency of social media use during Arab Spring activism was the Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said.” The page’s title refers to a man killed by police in Alexandria, Egypt in the summer of 2010, and the page was used to criticize police brutality and call for protests. The popularity of the page foreshadowed the scale of the upcoming protests of January 25, 2011; about 70,000 people indicated on the Facebook page that they planned on participating in the protests.<sup>21</sup> When the page’s creator, Wael Ghonim, was subsequently arrested on January 26, his arrest was widely discussed on Twitter, where some users said that they “would not rest until he was released.”<sup>22</sup> In this instance, social media allowed protesters to express solidarity both before and after engaging in collective action and served as a novel forum for the ongoing discussion of recent events.

It should be noted, however, that these tools are not homogeneous in either their designs or their use. *Foreign Policy*’s Blake Hounshell reported in mid-2011 that “[m]uch of the online organizing and mobilization that went into the Arab revolutions happened on Facebook, usually in Arabic... but Twitter is where activists went to get their message out to the world, more often in English.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, social media use was not unidirectional; in other words, messages did not simply emanate outward from the countries where uprisings occurred. After analyzing Twitter data for “#libya,” scholars at the Queensland University of Technology found that while Twitter was used by people in Libya to discuss and record civil war there, it was especially used by non-Libyans abroad to discuss the events in English.<sup>24</sup> These two factors represent important caveats that are rarely mentioned in media accounts of revolutionary uses of social media that assume homogeneity.

It should be noted that social media can also be used and/or restrained by authoritarian regimes. Governments can use social media to disseminate

propaganda. Governments can also control the Internet in a variety of ways, including by blocking websites, engaging in cyberattacks, filtering and manipulating content, and attacking and imprisoning bloggers.<sup>25</sup> In Tunisia's uprisings, the regime was able to use social media to identify and track down protesters and political dissidents.<sup>26</sup> In Egypt, officials shut down the country's Internet for five days—an action that took officials just one hour to complete.<sup>27</sup> Even purposefully slowed connections can impede regime opponents by limiting their ability to disseminate images and videos.<sup>28</sup> Thus, social media (and, more broadly, the Internet) can be used both to liberate and repress.

Such limitations on social media use (and Internet use more broadly) make the regime's cyber-capacity important for understanding the role of technology in protests and uprisings across countries. Freedom House creates an annual report on Internet freedom wherein it ranks a number of countries on a 0 (entirely free) to 100 (entirely not free) scale.<sup>29</sup> The scores do not seem to predict the scale and effectiveness of the Arab Spring uprisings. Iran and Saudi Arabia were ranked as "Not Free" and did not experience widespread, successful protests; however, Tunisia, which did see changes in the wake of large protests, was also ranked as "Not Free" with a score about halfway between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> Egypt was considered "Partly Free" and Libya was not ranked or evaluated.<sup>31</sup> In the 2012 report, the report authors introduce a useful taxonomy that distinguishes states as "blockers, nonblockers, and nascent blockers." In "blockers" like Saudi Arabia and Iran, governments block select websites for political reasons, and social media sites are often targeted.<sup>32</sup> "Nonblockers" like Egypt do not use systematic blocks, but instead use less visible tactics (like intimidation, hacking, cyberattacks, etc.) to maintain control while also maintaining a façade of a "free Internet."<sup>33</sup> Nascent blockers like Pakistan and Russia have only sporadic blocks for now.<sup>34</sup>

Despite this new taxonomy, Freedom House's Freedom on the Net index still does not lend itself well to quantitative assessments of governmental repression vis-à-vis protests during the Arab Spring. For example, the Libyan government shut down the Internet nationwide in March 2011,

which impeded Internet access for many residents until August 2011.<sup>35</sup> However, the report notes that the “online environment was notably more open after the rebel victory in October 2011 than during the Qadhafi era or the period of civil conflict.”<sup>36</sup> It is unclear how well Libya’s rating as “Partly Free” with a score of 43 captures this shift, as either the government’s severe repression or the opening risk being lost in a single score. Put differently, a score of 43 may seem too low given the earlier repression, yet it may also seem too high in the context of the later opening. In other words, an annual score fails to show the significant within-year shifts. More useful would be a measure that is disaggregated past the annual level (perhaps quarterly to capture shifts) and that can capture the level of actual government cyber-repression versus its capacity. This second aspect would help capture how dire the government considers each situation to be.

In conclusion, the international media have often ascribed a large role to social media and technology in explaining the Arab Spring, though the true extent of their significance remains open to debate. This narrative makes increasing technology use one of the factors to look for amongst “Western commentators who were caught off-guard by the Arab Spring and are now eager to spot the next possible spark.”<sup>37</sup> However, there are several key caveats, including the heterogeneity of social media tools, the relative shares of domestic versus international social media participants, and governments’ potentially repressive uses of tools, that should not be overlooked when comparing these two regions. This dynamic is similarly true in comparing youth and youth unemployment across MENA and SSA.

### **Youth and the Arab Spring**

Scholars and international media often pointed to youth as primary instigators of the Arab Spring uprisings, as evidenced in Middle East historian James L. Gelvin’s observation that “[a]bout a week and a half after the departure of Ben Ali, young people...began their occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo...After Egypt, ongoing protests in Algeria and Yemen took a new turn as young people consciously adopted the Tunisian

and Egyptian style of protests.”<sup>38</sup> The meaning of the term “youth” can vary according to its usage in context. Unless noted otherwise, however, this essay uses International Labour Organization (ILO) data, which defines youth as individuals in the 15-24 year-old age range.<sup>39</sup> Other sources, like media reports, may use the term more loosely, without an explicit age range.<sup>40</sup> This section discusses the effects of large youth populations on conflict and youth unemployment in MENA.

International relations scholar Gilbert Achcar reports that fifty percent or more of MENA’s population was under 25 years old as of 2010; of the regions for which he reports data, only SSA and South Asia matched this share.<sup>41</sup> The direct impact of large youth populations is disputed, however. Some have argued that “youth bulges”—circumstances wherein youth constitute a large part of a country’s population—can contribute to political violence.<sup>42</sup> Achcar disagrees, arguing that since MENA has a share of youth that is similar to other developing regions, it is not the size of the youth cohort but rather the socio-political and economic conditions they face, including unemployment, that are critical for explaining the occurrence of conflict.<sup>43</sup>

MENA’s youth are much more likely to be unemployed than youth in other regions. While Achcar provides some caveats regarding how well unemployment statistics capture facts on the ground (i.e., likely underreporting real unemployment), ILO data show that 23 percent of North African youth were unemployed in 2010 (versus 6.3 percent of adults) and 25.4 percent of Middle Eastern youth were unemployed in 2010 (versus 6.3 percent of adults).<sup>44</sup> In other words, youth in MENA are as much as four times more likely to be unemployed than adults.

Other factors, like higher education, affect the significance of these conditions of high youth unemployment. Henrik Urdal of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) notes that further education can sometimes reduce the risk of political violence (by increasing the opportunity cost of participation), but he also warns that if too many graduates are unable to obtain work (such as in public sector jobs created by the government to employ graduates), this can instead become the basis for additional



grievances—and even political violence.<sup>45</sup> MENA has a fairly high level of enrollment in tertiary education, with 22 percent of the population of university-age youth enrolled in 2009, much higher than SSA’s 6 percent.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, in 2008, people with tertiary education accounted for 24.7 percent of total unemployment in MENA.<sup>47</sup> While the data are admittedly one year apart, this nevertheless suggests that those with tertiary educations are actually *more* likely, on average, to be unemployed in MENA than those without; those enrolled in tertiary education (much less those who have graduated) make up just over one-fifth of the population and yet constitute about one-fourth of the unemployed. Accordingly, Achcar suggests that the issue of graduate unemployment was “a major contributing factor to the explosion” in Tunisia.<sup>48</sup> Urdal similarly reports that a disparity between education and opportunities for graduates in the Middle East contributes to radicalization and militant recruitment.<sup>49</sup>

This is the portrait painted in accounts of youth in MENA: a large youth cohort facing dire employment prospects, with even higher unemployment among university graduates. Discontent that stems from unemployment may help to explain the presence and prominence of youth at protests. Perhaps both desperation over existing circumstances and hope for better alternatives help to explain these protesters’ lack of fear. Given this attention to youth, it is natural to look for the “next Arab Spring” in other regions with bulging youth populations, including SSA.

### **Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Sub-Saharan Africa’s population is disproportionately young. Urdal reports that from 1950-1990, youth (ages 15-24) comprised about one-fourth of the adult populations in America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>50</sup> Yet SSA’s youth population will maintain that share while other regions decline; indeed, the UN Population Division has estimated that SSA will become the only region in which young adults (15-24) account for 25 percent or more of the population by 2050.<sup>51</sup> For comparison, “most other world regions are below 15%” in the same estimate.<sup>52</sup> The aforementioned youth bulge theory suggests that these circumstances would contribute to

political violence. Along these lines, the role of youth in the Arab Spring might be construed as confirmation of similarly disruptive prospects for SSA. There are, however, some key differences between SSA and MENA in this area.

As noted in the previous section, SSA's rate of enrollment in tertiary education (6 percent in 2009) is less than a third of MENA's (22 percent in the same year).<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the World Development Indicators do not provide an estimate for those with tertiary education as a share of the unemployed in SSA. However, because tertiary enrollment is so low in SSA, it seems unlikely that graduates account for a large share of youth unemployment. This should limit graduate unemployment as a source of discontent among youth in general throughout the region, although it may of course be present in particular cases and countries.

Official youth unemployment was also significantly lower in SSA than in MENA as of 2010. While youth unemployment was 25.4 percent in the Middle East (versus 6.3 percent for adults) and 23 percent in North Africa (versus 6.3 percent for adults), it was just 12.8 percent in SSA (versus 6.5 percent for adults).<sup>54</sup> According to this 2010 ILO data, MENA seemed to be an outlier while SSA was similar to other regions like Southeast Asia and Pacific (13.4 percent youth unemployment), South Asia (9.9 percent), and East Asia (8.8 percent).<sup>55</sup> If youth unemployment in SSA is viewed as similar enough to MENA to merit comparison, then perhaps one should also be asking about the possibilities of Arab Spring-style protests and contagion in those other regions.

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This does not mean, however, that youth circumstances in SSA were necessarily superior to those in MENA. The ILO's dichotomous treatment of employment means that even a little compensated work may constitute

“employment.”<sup>56</sup> An ILO report on youth employment notes that “South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa present relatively low regional youth unemployment rates, but this is linked to high levels of poverty, which means that working is a necessity for many young people.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, while employment figures suggest youth in MENA are about twice as likely to be unemployed as those in SSA, these fail to capture lived experience in each region.<sup>58</sup> This unfortunately complicates cross-regional comparisons of the implications of youth unemployment. At such a macro-level, the limitations of the data undermine their predictive value.

Lower unemployment would suggest fewer grievances among youth (and thus less political violence), but if higher poverty is in fact the cause, it could instead be the basis for further grievances. If grievances that lead to protests arise from a disconnect between youth expectations and reality, then gaining an understanding of the differing expectations between countries in MENA and SSA may be critical for predicting whether widespread and contagious protests will occur. Two countries could hypothetically have identical youth unemployment rates but vastly differing experiences with protests if youth expectations also differ significantly. Ethnographic studies provide this type of nuance in

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understanding expectations but do not allow effective comparisons across countries and regions. Unfortunately, youth population and unemployment statistics therefore have limited value in explaining the likelihood of Arab Spring-style protests in SSA. There

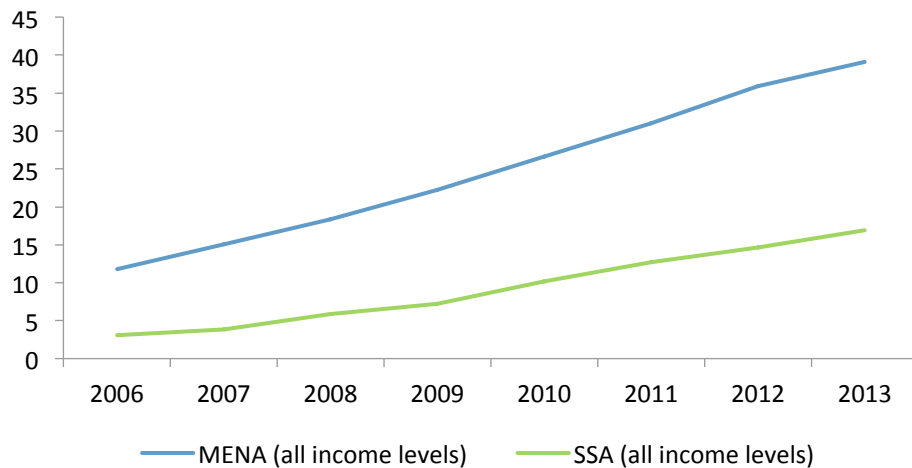
may be discontent in both, but the similarities are not evident in the data.

### **Technology in MENA and SSA**

Africa has seen a significant expansion of access to the Internet and of mobile phone use in the past decade. Because of the reported role of technology in the Arab Spring, this could lead one to expect potentially similar dynamics in SSA. However, there remain significant differences between MENA and SSA in the technological realm. This section

discusses Internet use, social media use, mobile phone penetration, and the debate over the effect of mobile phones on violence.

Internet use in SSA is not defined or limited by broadband subscriptions. According to World Bank estimates, there were on average 0.31 fixed broadband Internet subscribers per 100 people in SSA in 2013.<sup>59</sup> There were over 4.6 subscribers per 100 in MENA during the same year.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, SSA had 16.9 Internet users per 100 people to MENA's 39.1 in 2013.<sup>61</sup> This means that while people in MENA were almost fifteen times more likely to be fixed broadband Internet subscribers, they were only about two times more likely to be Internet users.<sup>62</sup> Mobile phones help to explain this discrepancy. In Nigeria, for example, 57.9% of “web traffic is via mobile compared to the 10% world average.”<sup>63</sup> This has led researchers like William Gumede of the University of London to assert that revolution may arrive in SSA by mobile phone (if it is to arrive at all).<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 1: Internet Users (per 100 people)<sup>65</sup>**

Facebook is frequently accessed in SSA; indeed, it “is the most visited website by Internet users” in Africa.<sup>66</sup> Surveys from the market research organization Balancing Act indicated that, in 2013, “[i]n the four countries

where face-to-face surveys were carried out for this research, between 14% (Tanzania) and 27% (Ghana) of all respondents were using it, a significant number on basic phones using SMS.”<sup>67</sup> While Facebook is the most used, journalist Russell Southwood notes that there are also local versions of social media.<sup>68</sup> It is intriguing to consider the possibility that locally-created social networks could provide a means of organizing protests. Given academia’s focus on Facebook and Twitter, indigenous social networking sites could easily go unnoticed.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, given that such sites would differ from their larger, international counterparts like Facebook, messages disseminated therein would be less likely to reach international audiences.

There is also higher mobile phone penetration in MENA than in SSA. In 2011, there were about 99.6 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in MENA versus just 53 in SSA.<sup>70</sup> This is despite SSA’s higher average annual growth in mobile connections (36 percent) from 2002 to 2012 than in Arab States (32 percent).<sup>71</sup> According to scholars Jan H. Pierskalla and Florian M. Hollenbach, “Africa is the largest growing cell phone market in the world,” which suggests that high annual growth in the region’s mobile connections could well continue.<sup>72</sup> The increase in the mobile phone market crosses socio-economic groups to a surprising extent. Data from 2013 Gallup surveys suggests that there is at least one phone per household in the majority of even the poorest 20% of the population.<sup>73</sup> The increasing prevalence of mobile phones is a potentially important factor given that mobile phones helped structure political action in the Arab Spring.<sup>74</sup> For example, communications scholar Tanja Bosch notes that “people used their mobile phones to record audio and video of the uprisings and to post these to Facebook or Twitter.”<sup>75</sup> Such evidence is not only important for documenting events, but also for shaping how they are understood. Increasing mobile phone ownership across socio-economic groups is important because it means those most likely to have grievances also have tools to organize and document, as in the Arab Spring. Expanding mobile phone ownership, however, is not unambiguously good.

The growth of SSA's mobile market and the persistence of civil conflicts have led scholars to study the relationship between mobile phones and violence. Results for the region are mixed. Pierskalla and Hollenbach argue that mobile phones "can increase the ability of rebel groups to overcome collective action problems" and coordinate despite geographic barriers.<sup>76</sup> Their comparison of violent events and mobile coverage indicates that "cell phone coverage has a significant and substantive effect on the probability of conflict occurrence. When cell phone coverage is present, the likelihood of conflict occurrence is substantially higher than otherwise."<sup>77</sup> Researcher Charles Martin-Shields, however, rebuts their argument, suggesting that, since "[t]echnology is an amplifier of human intent (Toyama 2011)," mobile phones can—and do—also contribute to conflict prevention and resolution.<sup>78</sup> Using examples from Kenya, he argues that phones can reduce information asymmetries between groups and thereby help avert security dilemmas.<sup>79</sup> In various instances, then, mobile phones could enable or prevent violence.

While mobile phones likely played an important role in the Arab Spring as means of documentation and communication, research on phones in Africa suggests that their impact reflects intention: mobile phone use is not always positive or revolutionary, but can sometimes be destructive or reactionary depending on the users. Increasing mobile phone use in Africa (and an increasing share of Internet-capable phones) will therefore not necessarily promote non-violent and widespread collaboration against oppressive regimes (as in the Arab Spring), but could instead facilitate alternatives, like insurgencies. Thus, even as mobile phones reduce communication barriers, they (along with social media and the Internet) could enable, but do not necessarily portend, an Arab Spring-style outcome.

### **Conclusion**

Youth and technology are factors that have been frequently discussed by the media and scholars alike in assessing the origins and development of the Arab Spring. Youth unemployment and insufficient opportunities for university graduates appear to have contributed to grievances and help

explain early participation by youth in protests in Tunisia and Egypt, for example. As discussed above, the social media use (facilitated by mobile phones), contributed to the protesters' ability to coordinate and document the uprisings. While frequent media reports on SSA might lead one to believe that the region could face similar protest contagion, this essay has pointed to some potentially important differences. Overall, the comparison between SSA and the Middle East and North Africa is not as strong as it first appears.

Social media did play a role in the Arab Spring, and sites like Facebook are regularly accessed in SSA, but Internet access is still substantially lower in SSA than in MENA. Mobile phones can be used to organize massive, non-violent protests, but they can also be used to coordinate violent insurgencies. Internet access is increasing in SSA, but it appears to be more mobile phone-driven than in MENA given the disparities in the data between broadband subscribers and those with access to the Internet.

Both MENA and SSA have large youth populations. However, official youth unemployment differs significantly (almost twice as high in MENA), and how these rates reflect lived experience is complicated by the exigencies of poverty and the ILO's dichotomous treatment of employment. Tertiary enrollment is much higher in MENA than in SSA, suggesting a higher probability for discontent among graduates in MENA. None of these statistics, though, fully capture the distance between youth expectations and realities—a critical factor in understanding youth willingness to protest.

Additionally, superficial comparisons fail to capture the role of the regime's response to protesters' technology use. The data from Freedom House indicate the level of variation in a given regime's capacity to manage, block, and punish content in cyberspace. Unfortunately, its Freedom of the Net 2013 report still includes only ten African countries.<sup>80</sup> Many SSA countries rated as "Not Free" or "Partly Free" in the Freedom in the World 2014 report are still not included in the Freedom of the Net reports.<sup>81</sup> This leaves it unclear in what types of cyber-repression these

regimes are already engaged (if any) and what their capacity may be in the face of potential Arab Spring-style protests.

The comparison between SSA and MENA in regards to the prospects for contagious, Arab Spring-style protests is thus plagued by unknowns. How much repressive capacity can SSA regimes impose on domestic Internet users? How similar are lived experiences that could create grievances among youth populations, despite differing overall statistics? Would the demonstration effect work across the linguistic and historical barriers in SSA? Are youth in SSA likely to become a vanguard of protesters, as they did in Tunisia and Egypt? Such questions suggest compelling areas of future research.

At least in the areas of technology and youth, there is insufficient evidence to believe that SSA is likely to experience widespread Arab Spring-style protests. There were a few early protests inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings, but they were unsuccessful.<sup>82</sup> There did not seem to be much sustained, inter-regional demonstration effect—or even interest—from MENA to SSA, given that survey data shows that “[i]n 2013, seven in 10 (70%) residents in 26 sub-Saharan African countries Gallup surveyed say they had not followed recent developments in the Arab world ‘closely at all,’ while 6% say they had followed them ‘very closely’ and 17% say ‘somewhat closely.’”<sup>83</sup> Of those in these latter two categories, respondents were almost twice as likely to say that the political happenings in the Arab world have had more negative impacts (46 percent) than more positive impacts (26 percent) on their country.<sup>84</sup> The conflict in Libya and the protracted quagmire in Syria are unlikely to increase positive perceptions of the Arab Spring’s outcomes.

It seems increasingly unlikely that the Arab Spring provides an attractive model of protests and revolution for SSA to emulate, and it is unclear just how comparable the youth/technology nexus in SSA is to MENA in regards to political protest and contagion, despite frequent media comparisons. Democratization and protests may be occurring in SSA, but the important differences noted in this essay suggest that no simple repeat of the MENA uprisings will occur there. Given this observation, it is



important that policy discussions in regards to youth and technology in SSA do not oversimplify and misapply the example of the Arab Spring.

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Despite the prominence of the Arab Spring in the modern popular imagination, over-reliance on comparing events in SSA to those that took place in MENA may be unhelpful at best and misleading at worst, as highlighted by the differences in youth unemployment

and technology use within the two regions.<sup>85</sup> Instead of continually asking “Is Sub-Saharan Africa next?” let us ask “What is next for Sub-Saharan Africa?”

### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Some authors have argued against the usage of the term “Arab Spring.” James L. Gelvin, for example, notes that “the term *spring* implies a positive outcome for the uprisings, which has yet to be achieved” (as of 2012 when his book was published) and that the uprisings actually broke out in winter. Nasser Weddady and Sohrab Ahmari similarly note how “bubbly” and “giddy” the term “spring” can be, as well as its incongruous seasonal denotation. Furthermore, they observe, “it risks essentializing the highly diverse Middle East as ‘Arab,’ when the regions comprises all sorts of ethnic and sectarian groups.” While Gelvin uses the term “the Arab uprisings,” Weddady and Ahmari nevertheless use the term “Arab Spring” in order to be clearly part of the conversation on those events. These reservations notwithstanding, this essay uses the term “Arab Spring” in order to avoid the geographical and temporal vagaries of the term “the Arab uprisings.” See: James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings : What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 32-33. See also: Sohrab Ahmari and Nasser Weddady, *Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Iran*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn’t*, Kindle ed., Stanford Briefs (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), Loc. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Slackman, “Is Arab Spring over for Youth? Movement for Change Runs up against Dictators’ Use of Lethal Aggression,” *International Herald Tribune*, 18 March 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Matthiesen, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, protests in Iran in 2009 were also described as the “Twitter Revolution.” See: Axel Bruns, Tim Highfield and Jean Burgess, “The Arab Spring and Social Media Audiences,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013), 872.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Blake Hounshell, “The Revolution Will be Tweeted: Life in the Vanguard of the New Twitter Proletariat,” *Foreign Policy* no. 187 (2011); Jillian C. York, “The Revolutionary Force of Facebook and Twitter” (Arab News: Troubles and Possibilities), *Nieman Reports* 65, no. 3 (2011); Tanja Bosch, “Youth, Facebook and Politics in South Africa,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 5, no. 2 (2013); Tao Papaioannou and Hugo Enrique Olivos, “Cultural Identity and Social Media in the Arab Spring: Collective Goals in the Use of Facebook in the Libyan Context,” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 6, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Ahmari and Weddady, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Harsch, “‘Arab Spring’ Stirs African Hopes and Anxieties,” United Nations, <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2011/%E2%80%99arab-spring%E2%80%99-stirs-african-hopes-and-anxieties>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; “Does Africa Need an Arab Spring?” *BBC News*, 24 January 2012, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16685041>>; Hamisi Kigwangalla, “Why Was There No ‘African Spring?’” *Al Jazeera*, 24 July 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/why-was-there-no-african-sprin-2014724133730619939.html>; Larisa Epatko, “Is Burkina Faso Sub-Saharan Africa’s Version of the Arab Spring?” *PBS Newshour*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/burkina-faso-subsaharan-africas-version-arab-spring/>

<sup>11</sup> Bosch, 122; *Freedom House*, “Map of Freedom 2014,” Freedom House, <https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/MapofFreedom2014.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> While other types of information communication technologies (ICTs), like satellite television, undoubtedly played a role, a more expansive definition would both make the comparison with Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) more difficult and lengthy. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>13</sup> This essay’s length constraints make such a focus necessary. Fortunately, a number of resources are available for those seeking a more expansive discussion of youths’ perspectives, motivations, actions, and related matters. See, for example: Samir Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf, *Arab Youth: Social Mobilization in Times of Risk* (London: Saqi Books, 2011); Alcinda Manuel Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2013); Ahmari and Weddady, *Arab Spring Dreams*.

<sup>14</sup> Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> This is not to suggest erroneously that there cannot be mass protests without social media. Indeed, as political analyst Nanjala Nyabola has noted, “The most significant

political movements in Africa and in other places have occurred independently of social media. Where people need or desire to be organized they will do [so] independently of the technology around them.” However, this essay does assume that technology played an important role in the escalation and contagion of the protests, such as by a demonstration effect during cycles of repression and protest. Not to discuss technology, therefore, would be to miss an important aspect of the Arab Spring. Quoted in Harsch, “‘Arab Spring’ Stirs African Hopes and Anxieties.”

<sup>16</sup> Howard and Hussain, 13.

<sup>17</sup> There were, of course, other factors involved, but attempting to include all of them would again complicate comparisons with SSA and exceed this essay’s scope.

<sup>18</sup> York, 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Freedom on the Net 2011: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media,” ed. Sanja Kelly and Sarah Cook (Freedom House, 2011), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square*, Kindle ed., Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), loc. 5691.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., loc. 5699; Ghonim was later released on February 7, though the exact reasons for his release remain unclear.

<sup>23</sup> Hounshell, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess, 886.

<sup>25</sup> “Freedom on the Net 2011,” 1.

<sup>26</sup> Honwana, 200.

<sup>27</sup> “Freedom on the Net 2011,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Saudia Arabia was a 70, Tunisia was an 81, and Iran was an 89. See: *ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>32</sup> “Freedom on the Net 2012: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media,” ed. Sanja Kelly, Sarah Cook, and Mai Truong (Freedom House), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>37</sup> “Does Africa Need an Arab Spring?”

<sup>37</sup> Gelvin, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, ed. G. M. Goshgarian (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 27.

<sup>40</sup> This loose definition of youth, which can also vary by culture and country, also potentially undermines comparisons between MENA and SSA. For example, Kenya considers youth to be 18-34 year-olds. Differing conceptions of youth could contribute to differing expectations (for jobs, socio-economic status, family formation, etc.)—and thus different levels of discontent and willingness to protest, even in statistically similar

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circumstances. See: United Nations Development Programme, “Kenya’s Youth Employment Challenge,” in *Discussion Paper* (2013).

<sup>41</sup> Achcar, 27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29; Henrik Urdal, “A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence,” *United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Adolescents, Youth and Development* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Achcar, 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Urdal.

<sup>46</sup> Achcar, 33.

<sup>47</sup> International Labour Organization, “Unemployment with Tertiary Education (% of Total Unemployment),” The World Bank, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TERT.ZS>

<sup>48</sup> Achcar, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Urdal.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Achcar, 33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Peter Alexander and Kim Wale, “Underemployment: Too Poor to Be Unemployed,” *Class in Soweto*, ed. Peter Alexander, et al. (Scottsville, South Africa: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2013), 127.

<sup>57</sup> International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A Generation at Risk* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2013), 5.

<sup>58</sup> Achcar, 26.

<sup>59</sup> The World Bank, “Fixed Broadband Internet Subscribers (Per 100 People),” 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.BBND.P2>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Author’s calculations.

<sup>63</sup> Stephanie Mlot, “Infographic: A Snapshot of Internet Use in Africa,” *PC Magazine*, 6 November 2013, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2426807,00.asp>

<sup>64</sup> Harsch, 12.

<sup>65</sup> The World Bank, “Fixed Broadband Internet Subscribers (Per 100 People),” 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.BBND.P2>

<sup>66</sup> Bosch, 122.

<sup>67</sup> Russell Southwood, “Africa: A Detailed Snapshot of Africa's Emerging Internet and Social Media Space - the Users and What They Are Doing,” *allAfrica*, 19 September 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201409210118.html>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Academia's focus on Facebook and Twitter may be due to their scale, cross-country and inter-regional comparability, and the availability of tools facilitating their study and analysis.

<sup>70</sup> The World Bank, "Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (Per 100 People)," 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2>

<sup>71</sup> GSMA, "Average Annual Growth in the Number of Mobile Connections in Selected Regions Worldwide from 2002 to 2012," *Statista*, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272168/average-worldwide-growth-of-mobile-connections/>

<sup>72</sup> Jan H. Pierskalla and Florian M. Hollenbach, "Technology and Collective Action: The Effect of Cell Phone Coverage on Political Violence in Africa," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Bob Tortora, "Africa Continues Going Mobile," *Gallup*, 1 May 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168797/africa-continues-going-mobile.aspx>

<sup>74</sup> Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Bosch, 121.

<sup>76</sup> Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Martin-Shields, "Inter-Ethnic Cooperation Revisited: Why Mobile Phones Can Help Prevent Discrete Events of Violence, Using the Kenyan Case Study," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 3 (2013), 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>80</sup> "Freedom on the Net 2013: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media," ed. Sanja Kelly, et al. (Freedom House, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> Freedom House, "Map of Freedom 2014," <https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/MapofFreedom2014.pdf>

<sup>82</sup> Jay Loschky, "Arab Spring Largely Ignored in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Gallup*, 3 July 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/172079/arab-spring-largely-ignored-sub-saharan-africa.aspx>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> This is not, however, to suggest that there are *no* legitimate bases for comparing the region. Corruption and authoritarian regimes, for example, are areas that could be examined further to look for similarities between pre-Arab Spring MENA and contemporary SSA.