Waithood, Restricted Futures and Youth Protests in Africa

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Waithood, is a portmanteau term of “wait” and the suffix “-hood” which means “waiting for adulthood”. Waithood represents a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, in which young people’s access to adulthood is delayed or denied. While their chronological age may define them as adults, they have not been able to attain the social markers of adulthood: earning a living, being independent, establishing families, providing for their offspring and other relatives, and becoming taxpayers. Young Africans face serious challenges of social exclusion, joblessness and restricted futures.

This presentation is concerned with the experiences of the young men and women in waithood who, in the past few years have come out into the streets to protest their condition and challenge the status quo. Indeed political instability, failed neo-liberal socioeconomic policies and bad governance have exacerbated longstanding societal problems and diminished young people’s ability to become fully fledged citizens. And this recent wave of youth protests around the world should best be understood in the context of this generation’s struggles for economic, social and political emancipation.

I will develop three fundamental arguments: First, the vast majority of young Africans are living in waithood. Their transition to adulthood has become so uncertain that a growing number of young men and women must improvise
livelihoods and conduct their personal and social relations outside of dominant socioeconomic frameworks.

Second, the recent protest movements, led mainly by young people, stem directly from the economic and social pressures they suffer, and from their pervasive political marginalization. And the young are starting to move from dispersed and unstructured social and political acts into more organized street protests.

And thirdly, while some of these youth protest movements have been able to overthrow regimes, systemic transformation takes time and requires more than a mere change in leadership. Major challenges arise in the pot-protest phase and as a new political order is being established. Young activists appear to be struggling to translate the political grievances of the protest movement into a broader political agenda. Clearly, they seem to be more united in defining what they don’t want and fighting it, and much less so in articulating what they collectively want. Then the key question becomes: how to play an active long-term role in politics and governance beyond street protests?

1. Waithood
African societies are struggling with strained educational systems, high unemployment rates, and insecure livelihoods, all of which seriously weaken the social fabric. The decline of opportunities in rural areas has led young men and women to migrate to the cities, where their chances of finding employment remain very slim. Young people increasingly are forced to survive in an oversaturated informal economy or as informal labour in the formal sector. All these factors create serious constraints on youths’ ability to attain adult independence.
Liggey, which means work in Wolof, the national language of Senegal, is celebrated as an important marker of adulthood. The ability to work and provide for themselves and others defines a person’s self-worth and position in the family and in the community. Yet, the majority of young people in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa are unable to attain the sense of dignity embedded in the notion of liggey.

In southern Mozambique, in the past, becoming a labour migrant in South Africa constituted a rite of passage into adulthood, as jobs in the South African mines helped young Mozambicans become husbands, fathers, and providers for their families and, in turn, allowed young women to become wives, mothers, and homemakers.

Today, however, African societies do not offer reliable pathways to adulthood; traditional ways of making this transition have broken down, and new ways of attaining adult status are yet to be developed. In West Africa, the vernacular term youthman is used in many countries to describe those who are stuck in this liminal position.

The notion of waithood was first used by Dianne Singerman (2007) in her work on youth in the Middle East and North Africa. I found this notion to be very helpful in capturing young people’s feeling of being blocked in a stage of prolonged or permanent youth. Waithood goes beyond securing a job and extends to all aspects of young people’s social and political life.

While Singerman’s usage of waithood suggests a sense of passivity, my research indicates that young people are not merely waiting, and hoping that their situation will change of its own accord. On the contrary, they are proactively
engaged in serious efforts to create new forms of being and interacting with society.

Waithood involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and financial independence; it represents the contradictions of modernity, in which young people’s expectations are simultaneously raised - by the new technologies of information and communication that connect them to global cultures - and constrained by the limited prospects and opportunities in their daily lives.

The severity of the impact of waithood on the lives of young Africans depends on each individual’s character, abilities and life skills. But it is also, largely, a function of their family background, level of education and access to resources. Those from the middle class, and well connected, are better placed to secure jobs and have a smoother trajectory towards adulthood.

Young men and women experience waithood in very different ways. For men, waithood entails facing the pressures of finding a steady job; securing the resources to purchase, build, or rent a home; and covering the costs of marriage and family formation. Although women are increasingly being educated and have always engaged in productive labor alongside household chores, marriage and motherhood are still the most important markers of adulthood. While giving birth may provide girls an entry into adulthood, their ability to attain full adult status often depends on men moving beyond waithood (Singerman 2007; Calves et al. 2007).

Waithood constitutes a twilight zone, or an interstitial space, in which young people navigate tenuous boundaries between legal and illegal, proper and improper, and right and wrong in order to survive. It is precisely at this juncture in their lives that young people are expected to make choices. And such choices
are important because they will help define their relationships towards work, family and intimacy, as well as the type of citizens they will become. Rather than being a short interruption in their transition to adulthood, waithood is gradually replacing conventional adulthood itself (Honwana 2012).

Many young people in Africa see waithood as stemming from national and global policies that have failed to reduce poverty and to promote equitable and broadly distributed economic growth. According to various political economists, structural adjustment programs have seriously weakened African states’ ability to determine national policies and priorities, and to uphold the social contract with their citizenry (Rogerson 1997; Manji 1998; Potts 2000).

Bad governance, corruption, and the absence of fundamental freedoms compound this predicament. Recent accelerated growth rates in the continent bear considerable promise. However, growth alone, without equity, will not guarantee social inclusion. And indeed, young people rebel against the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the rampant corruption that they observe as elites enrich themselves at others’ expense.

2. Street Protests: A reaction to waithood
Young Africans today are generally better educated and more closely connected with the rest of the world than their parents. The young people I interviewed did not seem like a ‘lost generation’ nor did they appear apathetic about what is happening in their societies. They are acutely conscious of their marginal structural position, and no longer trust the state’s willingness and ability to find solutions to their problems. In their shared marginalization, young people develop a sense of common identity and a critical consciousness that leads them to challenge the established order (Honwana 2012, 2013).
Like other social groups, youth have always been involved in everyday processes of social change by fashioning the spaces within which they try to get by and assert their rights. Asef Bayat calls these dispersed actions ‘non-movements,’ which he describes as “quiet and unassuming daily struggles” outside formal institutional channels in which everyday social activities blend with political activism (2010:5). In Africa, young women and men engage in civil society associations, in popular culture, in debates through cyber social networks, and in political demonstrations. If we pay careful attention to the lyrics of their songs, the verses in their poems, the scripts of their plays, and the discourses propagating in their Facebook pages, blogs, tweets and SMSs we uncover a strong critique of the status quo.

Over the past few years, however, young people started to move from this “quiet encroachment” (Bayat 2010:56) on public space and into a more open and vociferous takeover of the national political stage, engaging in street protests and questioning their waithood status.

Thousands of young Mozambicans staged riots in Maputo in early September 2010 to protest a substantial rise in the prices of bread, water, and fuel. The escalation of these protests forced the government to concede and reverse the price hikes. In Tunisia in 2011 youth from diverse social strata articulated grievances ranging from unemployment, to corruption, to the denial of free expression. They not only mobilized other Tunisians to oust the regime of Ben Ali, but also inspired similar activism within the continent, in the Middle East, and more globally. In Dakar in June 2011, rallying around the movement *Y’en a Marre!* (Enough is enough!), Senegalese youth came out to the streets to stop the approval of constitutional amendments to benefit former president Wade. Galvanized by this victory, and using the slogan “*Ma Carte d’Electeur, Mon Arme*”
(my voting card, my weapon), the young Senegalese helped to remove Abdoulaye Wade from office in February 2012.

Apart from the protests in Egypt and Libya, young people also took to the streets in anti-government protests in Sudan, Angola, Burkina Faso, Malawi and Nigeria, among other places on the continent. In the Middle East, Iran, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and more recently Turkey, have all witnessed youth riots. But this is not just an African and Middle Eastern story. In Greece, Portugal, Spain, the UK, Chile, Brazil, the United States and Venezuela, young people also came out to the streets to denounce unemployment and demand better life prospects.

Although national and regional contexts differ and grievances are diverse, young people’s frustrations derive from deepening social inequalities. And these protests are cries for freedom by a generation yearning to live a better life.

By taking to the streets united and braving police, some youth movements have been able to overthrow dictatorships, vote out corrupt leaders, and force governments to reverse unpopular decisions. Yet, despite their successful protests, young Mozambicans have not seen fundamental changes in their socioeconomic conditions; young Senegalese are growing disappointed with the new government; and for a long time young Tunisians remained deeply dissatisfied with the direction and slow pace of the transition. All of them realize that translating a protest movement into an ongoing political presence that can shape public policies at the national level constitutes an immense challenge (Honwana 2013).

3. The New Politics?
Once old regimes fall and the enthusiasm and energy of street protests wane, young activists find themselves more divided; the broad unity forged during
street protests dissipates as they struggle to articulate a new common purpose and to define a new political role for themselves. While ensconced political forces have blocked youth’s political involvement, the horizontal and non-hierarchical structures adopted by the youth movements do not provide them with clear leadership to contend for power and enter the formal political arena. And, in the aftermath of street protests, young people appear to be retreating back to the periphery of formal politics, into their ‘non-movements.’

Many young activists denounce old-style party politics and object to being manipulated by politicians, whom they regard as corrupt and self-serving. They consciously distance themselves from partisan politics, refusing to transform their movements into formal parties. Even those young activists who hold party memberships often complain that their voices are ignored.

Simon Critchley (2011) suggests that, the disconnection between youth and current political culture derives from the dissociation of power from politics. “Power is the ability to get things done,” “politics is the means to get those things done,” and democracy is the system that allows for power to be exercised by the people. Today, the divorce of power from politics is deepening because power is being seized by supranational finance and trade corporations and by trans-national organized crime syndicates. Devoid of power, politics responds to the interests of supranational powers rather than to the will of the people. In this sense, democracy becomes a charade, as politics has no power but instead serves power. Critchley reminds us that the separation between politics and power happened, not by chance, but through the connivance of politicians who embraced free market capitalism as the engine for growth and personal gain. In the same vein, Aditya Nigam (2012) suggests that in the wake of the North African revolutions, “something, clearly, is waiting to be articulated in this relentless refusal of the political” by the younger generation (175).
Young Africans are already developing alternative sites for social and political intervention beyond party politics and engage with associations that involve political action without requiring party membership. They fight for freedom of expression in the real and virtual worlds; they head anti-corruption and open-government campaigns; they work in youth leadership development programs, women’s rights, environmentalism and the like.

In Tunisia, young activists are enjoying the freedom of independent civic and political engagement following the revolution, as these were banned under the old regime. But at the same time, the disappointment with party politics makes some young people turn to politicized forms of Islam. In Senegal, the Y’en a Marre activists pride themselves on being non-partisan and focused their efforts on a national public campaign to create what they call a ‘New Type of Senegalese’: one that is more socially and politically conscious and fights for the well-being of the Senegalese people.

However, to what extent will this work within civil society associations constitute an effective platform to steer meaningful political change? Can youth drive political change from outside formal political structures? Will street protests remain young people’s main mechanism for exerting pressure on those in power? How does this generation envision the ‘new politics’? These are some of the questions that will merit further research and analysis as this generation struggles with waithood and the wave of youth protests continues to unfold.

Intriguingly, my young interlocutors seem to believe that it is possible to achieve fundamental change outside of dominant political structures, even if they, themselves, have not yet fully articulated how to do so. In their view, transition processes are not linear; they take time and are full of twists and turns along the
way. However, only time will tell whether the ‘waithood generation’ will effectively be able to redress the wrongs and build a better world.