

Combating Shrinking Civic Space: Youth Activism for Inclusive and Democratic Governance

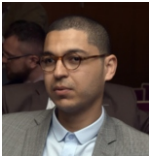
Date: 30 September, 2021

Time: 14 Hours GMT

'If the youth don't protest, who will?'
(Woman protesting against the military coup in Myanmar)

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Speakers



Nizar Ben Salah
Maghreb Economic Forum (MEF)

Tunisia



Ashad Sentongo
*Genocide and Atrocity Prevention Support
(GAPS)*

Uganda



Rosewita Katsande
*Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust
(YETT)*

Zimbabwe



Lloyd Pswarayi
Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU)

Zimbabwe

Moderator



Olawale Ismail

Youth Researcher
African Leadership Centre/
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Overview

The period since the IDRC launched its research initiative, *Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice* in 2017—and more ominously still, since UNSCR 2250 was adopted in 2015—has coincided with significant shrinking of civic space and erosion of democratic rights and freedoms across much of Africa. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World report](#) in 2020 documented the 14th year of what it described as an 'alarming global decline in democratic governance and respect for human rights', with sub-Saharan Africa (and West Africa in particular) leading the world in both positive and negative movement: of the 12 largest declines globally, seven were in sub-Saharan Africa, and of the seven largest improvements, six were in the region. Only seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa were now in Freedom House's 'Free' category—the lowest figure since 1991. Furthermore, only 9 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa now lived in 'Free' countries, compared with 11 percent in 2018.

In Africa, as in other regions of the world, restrictions that hamstring NGO activity form part of a broader strategy adopted by regimes to narrow democratic space and prevent challenges to the rule of strongmen and governing parties.Curbs on NGOs working in Africa, particularly those that focus on human rights and governance, are being imposed in the context of a global assault on democracy that often appears to be coordinated across borders.

Regimes have taken advantage of the pandemic lockdown to introduce further restrictions on freedom of association and on the ability of opposition groups to mobilize and/or campaign openly.

Concomitantly, the notion of coupling 'democracy' with 'development' –a linchpin of the liberal development discourse--was being challenged by authoritarian models which were demonstrating success in generating rapid and broad-based development and alleviating mass poverty (backed in the case of the most successful representative of the genre, China, by diplomacy and serious amounts of cash).

The main danger is that with creeping authoritarianism and shrinking civic space, youth would no longer have the space to advocate on their own behalf, at the same time telegraphing the radical notion (already a principal lesson of the Jasmine Revolution) that 'democracy' is no longer sufficient.

And yet paradoxically—even while there is considerable evidence that youth have been losing faith in the state and political institutions and recoiling from politics- this period is also characterized by striking acts of youth political activism, interpreted by one critic as intended to 'renegotiate the social contract with the state', including:

- Zimbabwe protests that led to the military coup to remove Mugabe
- Sudan protests that removed Al Bashir
- South African 'tuition' protests
- #EndSARS
- #FixKenya, #FixGhana protests

Objective of the Webinar

In the research that took place under the IDRC funding initiative, 'Resilience' emerges as the crucial attribute (or variable) that inoculates the youth against private and public sources of violence, as well systemic marginalization and exclusion. There is much less focus, by contrast, on how youth activism and mobilization may be summoned to transform oppressive social, economic and political conditions, or foster more democratic, accountable and inclusive governance. In this webinar, we interrogate the shrinkage in civic space that has occurred across much of Africa and its implications for youth activism, development and inclusion; we also pinpoint three case studies where analysis of youth political activism was incorporated into the research, as the focal point for the broader discussion and lessons learned.

The following questions will be considered (among others):

- (a) How does (or can) youth activism advance inclusive, democratic and accountable Governance (experience of Tunisia)?
- (b) What have we learned from efforts to enhance youth political inclusion (example: the campaign for youth seat quotas in the Zimbabwe parliament (YETT)? How do youth themselves define 'inclusion'?
- (c) What success has attended Youth political agency/electoral mobilization to challenge incumbency, such as the National Unity Party in Uganda (GAPS)?
- (d) What about those countries that featured in the IDRC research (such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Tanzania, and even Senegal) where Freedom House also recorded significant declines in civic space and democratic freedoms?
- (e) Finally, what have we learned from the various forms of youth political and policy engagement (in both formal and informal spaces)? What entry points and alliances are involved? What works and what does not (eg single issue protest/advocacy vs demands for systemic change and accountability) and how do we ensure that gender equity is taken on board, etc?

[The KPSRL Conference will deal with global dimensions of these questions, and how global resources (including aid and diplomacy) can be brought to bear to support youth causes and enhance inclusion.

The webinar will be moderated by Dr. Olawale Ismail, a leading Youth researcher at the African Leadership Centre in Nairobi and Kings College London, and co-author (with Funmi Olofinakin) most recently of "Why do youth participate in violence in Africa? A review of evidence", *Conflict, Security & Development* (June 2012). (Publication may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1933035>). Dr Ismail also led a recent webinar on 'Youth-led Protest and the Renegotiation of the 'State' in Africa: initial mapping assessment', ALC Research Seminars: No. 3: African Leadership Centre (ALC), Nairobi, 29th June 2021.