



Institute for Security Studies

SITUATION REPORT

ENCOURAGING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AFRICA

The potential of social
media platforms

The popular protests in North Africa, dubbed the 'Arab Spring', have reignited debate on the role of social media in facilitating political participation and active citizenry engagement. The 2010/2011 popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt were largely organised, supported and driven through social media platforms.

Blogs, the micro-blogging site Twitter, the social networking site Facebook and mobile telephony played a key role in facilitating active political expression in the form of demonstrations against high rates of unemployment, poverty, rampant government repression and corruption. The violent protests in the United Kingdom (UK) from July–August 2011 were also driven through Twitter, Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger.²

The popular protests in Tunisia forced President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali out of office on 14 January 2011. Multiparty elections were subsequently held in October 2011, in which the Ennahda Movement party won 40 per cent of the vote, securing 89 of the Constituent Assembly's 217 seats and marking a new chapter in Tunisian politics. Similarly, protests mediated by social media in Egypt contributed to the forced resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 and subsequent legislative elections in December 2011. These citizen-led engagements, which were largely facilitated by social media, have brought to the fore the latent potential of social media platforms to drive political participation.

The 'Arab Spring' developments have led to debate as to whether an 'African Spring' facilitated through the use of social-media-based tools is possible. This report argues that social media have the potential to facilitate the active citizen political engagement required to bring about political change in Africa. If events in Tunisia and Egypt are anything to go by, it is reasonable to be cautiously optimistic about the potential of social media to encourage political participation and active citizenship.

Any discussion of this potential, however, should also engage with the context-specific challenges it faces. One of the key challenges facing meaningful social-media-driven citizen participation is the increasing distrust of social media by some African governments. Various regimes have blocked, censored, or threatened to block or intercept the use of social media platforms. Several other disruptive strategies have also been employed to discourage citizens from engaging with social media tools. Where citizens have used social media to mobilise protests, the communication tools have been blamed by authorities for facilitating and

sustaining protests, resulting in pervasive anti-social-media sentiments from the corridors of power.

The 'social media moral panic' phenomenon is not only of concern in Africa but also around the world. The UK government experienced jitters over social media following violent riots that rocked the country in mid-2011, prompting Prime Minister David Cameron to propose blocking the use of social media during future occurrences of riots and civil unrest. The proposal was widely criticised in the UK as threatening the right to freedom of speech and expression. Following the UK riots and the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, on 13 July 2011, Cameron announced the Leveson Inquiry to Parliament to assess the culture, practices and ethics of the media.³ The ongoing inquiry is primarily investigating the British press, but its remit also includes broadcasters and social media networks in order to 'make recommendations on a new, more effective policy and regulatory regime'.⁴

Against this background, it is evident that inasmuch as social media platforms possess the potential to facilitate political participation, some regimes are committed to regulating and restraining these spaces. This paper is thus divided into three main sections. The first one defines the two main concepts of the study, namely *social media* and *political participation*. The second attempts to explicate both the actual and potential roles of social media in relation to political participation. The final section considers the difficult socioeconomic and often repressive contexts within which social media platforms are being adopted. The paper also considers the implications of government interventions and strategies such as censorship on citizen political participation, drawing on several case studies.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

For a proper contextualisation of the following discussion, it is important to define the above-mentioned concepts.

Social media

The term *social media* broadly refers to Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online.⁵ It is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them 'social'. The interactive nature of these web-based tools marks a paradigmatic shift in web-based communication. In the early developmental stages of the web known as Web 1.0, online information (primarily in text format) was pushed to passive users whose social engagement with it was constrained because of inherent structural and technological limitations. In the current phase, Web 2.0, web-based tools now facilitate a social connectivity that enables users to produce, interact and

share content online.⁶ Internet users have thus evolved from consumers of web-based content to 'prosumers' who also produce content.

This shift has led to the development of many different forms of social media platforms. These web-based tools include Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogs, wikis, podcasts, photographs, videos, rating and social bookmarking. There are six different categories of social media platforms:

- Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)
- Blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter – real-time information networks)
- Video content communities (e.g. YouTube)
- Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)
- Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. SecondLife)⁷
- Picture sharing sites (e.g. Flickr)⁸

There has been a significant increase in the uptake of and engagement with some of these platforms by African citizens, specifically in the mobile sphere. For example, the social networking site Facebook has been widely adopted as a communicative tool across the continent with approximately 30 665 460 registered users as of 30 June 2011.⁹ According to latest data released in May 2011, the Middle East and Africa regions have also experienced the largest growth rate, increasing by 63 per cent in the past year to 90.3 million visitors.¹⁰ Blogging, including the microblog service Twitter, has also been embraced by Africans. The role Twitter played in facilitating protests in Tunisia and Egypt indicates its importance as a form of social media that contributes to political change. Interestingly, statistics suggest that in Africa, mobile network growth is clearly dominating, while fixed telephone lines remain at 3 per 100 inhabitants, by far the lowest in the world.¹¹ The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) further suggests that 'the limited availability of fixed lines has also been a barrier to the uptake of fixed broadband and it is most likely that Africa's broadband market will be dominated by mobile broadband'.¹² Thus, social media for mobile users in Africa is becoming far more important to understand than fixed line Internet use.

The current Internet penetration rate in Africa is low but, paradoxically, the continent has been experiencing a general upward trend in the use of social media. Despite estimates suggesting increased mobile penetration and usage, stark demographic and class inequalities still exist. For the most part, online and mobile social media remain largely tools of the metropolitan social elite and middle class populations. The economically wealthy are usually the ones who enjoy access to networked computing and communication and have the skills and confidence to use them, although the massive uptake of mobile money, particularly in East Africa, suggests a change in trend.

Africa's Internet users (more than 100 million at the end of 2011) represent just a small fraction (5,6 per cent) of the 2,1 billion Internet users around the world.¹³ According to the ITU, only about one in ten Africans have Internet access.¹⁴ This low Internet penetration rate is a result of myriad socioeconomic and political challenges facing Africans trying to go online. These include low computer literacy skills and the prohibitive cost of accessing both computers and the Internet. There are also costs related to hardware, skills barriers, temporal restrictions (those with more leisure time tend to be the ones to use the technologies), and literacy and linguistic factors, which all limit Internet use in developing world contexts.

The social networking site Facebook has been widely adopted as a communicative tool across the continent

Paradoxically, these challenges have contributed to Africa's steady but rapid growth rate in usage of mobile phones and mobile Internet. According to the ITU, developments in the mobile sector have changed the global ICT landscape and 'by the end of 2007, almost one out of two people had a mobile phone. In Europe, penetration has surpassed the 100% mark. More than one out of four Africans and one out of three Asians have a mobile phone.'¹⁵ However, it is worth noting that having access to a mobile phone does not automatically translate into usage of mobile Internet and social media platforms. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the availability of mobile Internet is positive as it offers the potential for augmenting social connectivity and engagement. ITU has predicted that it is most likely that the future of Africa's broadband market will be dominated by mobile broadband and the penetration of mobile phones is also likely to encourage the growth of mobile Internet, and therefore social media use.¹⁶ Access to mobile phone Internet will also provide the potential to transcend a number of challenges currently impeding communication in the more remote or rural parts of Africa.

The increasing penetration of mobile phones and mobile Internet usage in Africa looks set to continue. Various undersea fibre-optic cable system initiatives across the continent, such as the East African Submarine System (EASSy), the West African Cable System (WACS) and the East African Marine System (TEAMS), aim to improve broadband connectivity and lower related costs. Although the cost of broadband (the fastest means of accessing the Internet) has been decreasing, access to high-speed

Internet connections remains expensive for the majority of Africans. According to ITU in May 2011, 'Africa continues to stand out for its relatively high prices. Fixed broadband Internet access in particular remains prohibitively high, and, across the region as a whole, still represented almost three times the monthly average per capita income.'¹⁷ ITU's ICT Price Basket (IPB) measures the affordability of ICT services across countries and over time, based on three sub-baskets (fixed telephone, mobile cellular and fixed broadband Internet services) and computed as a percentage of average gross national income (GNI) per capita.¹⁸ ITU's 2010 IPB figures indicate that Africa's fixed broadband Internet sub-basket remains prohibitively high at 291 per cent of GNI per capita, compared to Europe's two per cent of GNI per capita and the Americas' 22 per cent of GNI per capita.¹⁹ Similarly, mobile cellular services remain high at 25 per cent of GNI per capita, compared to Europe's one per cent of GNI per capita and the Americas' and Asia-Pacific's five per cent of GNI per capita.²⁰

The laying of various undersea optical fibre cables to improve broadband connectivity across Africa will significantly lower the currently prohibitive costs of mobile and wired Internet over time. Cheaper Internet connectivity could lead to increased penetration. Increased penetration will provide the potential for citizens to engage further with social media. Consequently, many citizens will possess the power to use social media for political involvement.

Political participation

Political participation is a fluid concept and the notion encompasses a diverse set of activities. It can be defined as citizen acts to influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives.²¹ In other words, political participation can be understood as referring to the various mechanisms through which the public express their political views and so exercise their influence on the political process.

The various forms that political participation takes include voting, which is regarded as the most common and most basic form of political action. Electoral participation also encompasses various other processes, such as citizens' involvement in election campaigns, attending meetings or attempting to access information on different political parties. Other forms of participation include citizens' engagement in grassroots politics within their local communities through attending community gatherings and interacting with their local political representatives. Political participation also includes actions such as attending civil protests or signing petitions on different issues and joining interest groups that engage in lobbying or political advocacy. The forms of political participation mentioned here are by no means exhaustive. Political participation is a multidimensional concept that embodies a wide range of

actions and this report attempts to discuss only the most common of political activities.

It is worth noting that various factors influence political participation. The way citizens participate politically is not homogeneous. Rather, the citizens who participate in the most common form of political activities constitute an unrepresentative set of citizens in terms of age, sex, and economic or educational status, among other variables.

Political participation is expensive and requires a great deal of investment from individuals willing to engage in political activities. The process is quite taxing as far as time, money, knowledge and information are concerned. For example, in Africa, where poverty is rife, lack of money prevents people from travelling to exercise their right to vote. According to the World Bank, in 2005, 50,9 per cent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa was living on less than \$1.25 a day.²² These financial constraints can also keep citizens from attending community meetings or in engaging in other activities that require any financial investment. Within contexts where poverty is extensive, time is an important factor that determines whether citizens devote time to political participation or engage in other personal activities.²³ Citizens are more likely to devote time to activities that guarantee their survival than to political participation that does not promise an immediate and tangible material outcome for them. Thus, with little time available, citizens' political activity is heavily compromised.

Many African countries have poor or nonexistent 'political infrastructure', in terms of things like polling stations and community meeting halls. Physical infrastructure enabling citizens to reach the nearest political infrastructure, and infrastructure for information transmission, is also inadequate,²⁴ and this significantly hinders political involvement.

One of the major obstacles to citizen political engagement is undeniably the issue of lack of access to information that would allow enlightened political choices. There is a dearth of reliable information in many African countries and some governments heavily curtail access to what is available. The cases of repressive regimes, such as the aforementioned North African nations before the 2010 revolutions, as well as Uganda, Angola and Zimbabwe, offer notable illustrations. In these countries, access to media (television, newspapers, radio and the Internet) is heavily restricted and regulated. In such contexts, what is generally reported on are issues that are unlikely to spur negative popular reactions. As Noam Chomsky's 'propaganda model' on the manufacture of public consent highlights, in such environments the media has to toe the official government line.²⁵

Access to information is a two-fold concept. It involves information that is available and readily accessible, as well as information proactively sought out by citizens. Seeking out information is an integral part of political

participation and this element is related to the political activity of attending political assemblies. Thus, for citizens to fully exercise their political rights, the political context has to allow access to information. However, freedom of association and assembly related to citizens' right to access information is heavily stifled in several African countries, meaning that the population's ability to actively engage in political activities is curtailed. Having looked at the various forms of political participation, and the different factors and challenges that impact on citizens' political involvement, this study will now discuss how social media tools can be leveraged to enhance political participation.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Social media have great potential for encouraging collaborative political participation. Accessible social media platforms offer ordinary citizens the opportunity to interact more directly and actively with their political systems. Social media tools also possess the potential to allow diaspora communities to get involved in social-political processes back home. People engage with social media for various reasons but essentially it is all about the human psyche. People use social media to air their views and express (in some cases) anger and dissatisfaction. Passion drives social media. People make comments on and reply to issues that affect them directly. The best way to examine this further is to look at specific forms of political participation and the impact social media can have on them.

Role of social media tools in electoral participation

Various African political actors engaged in electoral processes are increasingly using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs in their campaigns. Political parties and independent political advocacy and interest groups have recently used Facebook, Twitter and political blogs as mediating platforms to engage citizens. Similarly, citizens have employed social media to participate in the electoral process.

There are some pertinent examples of social media being widely used across Africa to encourage citizens' political involvement. It is widely known that running election campaigns through social media platforms is a tactic that has been successfully employed in developed countries. For example, US President Barack Obama ran a widely popular election campaign in 2008 that employed social media to good effect. Various political players in Africa have made significant strides towards running election campaigns through social media. Nigeria and Zambia offer good recent illustrations in this regard.

Nigeria

President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria successfully utilised Facebook to engage with Nigerian citizens during the 2011 presidential elections. Jonathan even took the unprecedented decision of announcing his presidential candidacy on Facebook. The bid was announced on 15 September 2010 to his 217 000-plus fans through his Facebook page. By election day on 16 April 2011, Jonathan had over half a million followers.²⁶

In Nigeria's electoral process, social media tools were not only employed for political campaigns. Various institutions involved in the elections also conducted their own social media initiatives. Institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), different political parties, candidates, media houses and civil society groups engaged with citizens on various platforms. During the month-long election process in April 2011, INEC posted almost 4 000 tweets, many in response to voter queries. A report by two researchers on the role played by social media platforms during the electoral process revealed that 'Twitter ultimately proved to be the most efficient way to interact with INEC'.²⁷ Similarly, during the election, Nigerian mainstream media struck a relationship with social media platforms that enhanced both citizens' participation and professional journalistic practices. Journalists from various media organisations engaged with citizens on Facebook and the citizens' contributions informed the journalists' questions during interviews with political players in institutions such as INEC.

One of the major obstacles to citizen political engagement is undeniably the issue of lack of access to information

It is widely acknowledged that age difference is a major factor in political participation. It has been argued through research conducted by the Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (EISA)²⁸ and Resnick and Casale²⁹ that young people are less politically involved because of a lack of political will or motivation, a lack of capacity to politically engage, or a lack of opportunity. However, social media platforms are beginning to change this trend, and are being used to encourage young people to vote or engage in other forms of electoral participation. During the aforementioned Nigerian elections, a social media campaign was launched to encourage youths to be involved in the elections, urging them to register to vote, which resulted in an increase in the number of young

people who voted. Furthermore, young people also utilised Twitter and Facebook to engage with the candidates about their policies.

Zambia

In another electoral process in 2011, various civil society and interest groups employed social media to monitor incidents related to Zambia's September 2011 presidential elections. For example, Bantu Watch, a civil society-driven website utilised Facebook and Twitter to encourage 'registered voters and interested parties to report incidents involving election-related violence, hate speech, corruption and other matters both online via the website and via text message'.³⁰ Tweets with the hash-tag '#Zambiaelections' were automatically compiled and linked to the Bantu Watch website.³¹ This initiative, which allowed citizens to participate in monitoring the electoral process, marked an unprecedented step in utilising social media to entrench citizenry engagement with the electoral system.

Social media in mediating protests and popular campaigns

As previously noted, political participation also includes actions such as engaging in civil protests, signing petitions and joining interest groups that engage in lobbying or political advocacy. The role of social media in leveraging this type of political involvement should not be underestimated. The popular protests dubbed the 'Arab Spring', which were largely mediated through the use of Twitter, Facebook and blogs, provide one of the most significant case studies of the role of social media in enhancing citizen political engagement.

Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution' was largely organised, supported and driven through the use of Facebook and Twitter as protesters demonstrated against government corruption and unemployment. Social media platforms played a key role in the Tunisian revolution in various means such as grassroots mobilisation, facilitating and supporting the role of civil society and active citizenship, acting as a counter-rumour to government propaganda machinery.³²

Similarly, the Egyptian protests were also largely driven by citizens' access to and use of social media and mobile technology. The mainstream media also engaged with protesters online and their citizen-informed coverage of the protests assisted in energising the public protests against Mubarak and his government. Various social-media-based activities contributed to the free flow of information in Egypt as people engaged with each other about dissatisfaction with the Mubarak regime. These activities included engaging through Facebook pages and groups, and sharing web links on relevant political issues related to the protests. Similarly, Twitter also experienced a hive of activity as ordinary citizens with access to the technology, expert

political bloggers and activists engaged with each other on these platforms. These engagements were crucial in sustaining the momentum of the protests.

A pertinent example is the case of Wael Ghonim, Google's Egyptian Marketing Executive, who was the administrator of the Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Saeed', which helped to facilitate the protests. He was arrested for 11 days for his role in triggering the protests.³³ Demands for Ghonim's release became a rallying point for the protestors and he was feted as a hero of the digitally facilitated revolution. Journalists and experts also uploaded their articles, photos, videos, and blogs. Political blogs written by political experts and activists provided citizens with information. Considering the mobile nature of protests, the role played by smart phones and other mobile devices in maintaining communication was truly essential.

The Egyptian protests provided a springboard for the emergence of similar cases with varying degrees of success elsewhere. It has also brought to the fore the inextricable connection between networked media (such as Facebook and Twitter) and mass and interpersonal media (such as radio, newspapers and mobile phones). The role of mass and interpersonal communication forms in popular uprisings remains important and social media possess the potential to augment this role.

Towards an 'African Spring'?

Against the background of the Arab Spring, it has been argued that this new type of political activism and participation, facilitated through social media, will spread across the rest of the African continent.³⁴ However, this 'African Spring' has not quite taken off as anticipated. The most significant instance is the recent protest activity in Uganda. Ugandans rekindled the second phase of the 'walk-to-work' campaign protesting against the continued increase in the cost of basic commodities and the cost of living, piling pressure on President Yoweri Museveni's government. Uganda's economy has been on the decline since 2010, recording a weaker growth rate of 5.1 per cent in 2010, and inflation has continued to rise, peaking at 28.3 per cent in September 2011. The prices of basic goods continue to rise beyond the means of average Ugandans.

The role of social media in facilitating the Ugandan protests has brought to the fore the potential of these communicative tools to enhance Ugandan citizens' political involvement. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs written within and outside Uganda, have been valuable in driving the protests. Among the pressure groups that have adopted social media tools to drive protests is the group Activists for Change (A4C). The group has tried to mobilise Ugandans through its Facebook and Twitter pages by engaging with citizens, political bloggers and mainstream media and linking to relevant articles and blogs.

A4C and other interest groups have adopted these tools to help them facilitate political conversations and protests. On its Facebook page, A4C reveals that its mission is to effect democratic change through mobilising the masses.³⁵ It is worth mentioning, however, that although social media have enhanced and facilitated political participation, the major hindrance impeding citizen involvement has been the government's continued crackdown on the protest organisers. According to news reports, three members of the A4C pressure group, Sam Mugumya, Francis Mwijukye and Ingrid Turinawe, were arrested and charged with treason for allegedly attempting to overthrow the government.³⁶

Despite the potential shown by social media, research by Evgeny Morozov critiques the liberating potential of the Internet and the ideas of cyber-utopianism. In the article 'Why the Internet Is a Great Tool for Totalitarians' Morozov argues that the Internet actually strengthens existing dictatorships and facilitates the control of their populations.³⁷ It should be noted that social media and networks can also be used for authoritarian (and democratic) state surveillance, monitoring and filtering. For example, the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency requires Internet cafes to log the names and addresses of customers in order to track down customers' illegal activities online.³⁸ Despite these challenges, social media can still play a role in facilitating citizen participation. Engaging with these platforms will allow citizens to circumvent the wide range of tactics used to stifle public opinion.

Social media encouraging citizens' engagement with political actors and institutions

Social media play a key role in facilitating the interactive relationship between citizens and political representatives. These communication platforms allow citizens to engage with their political leaders at local community, municipal, provincial and national levels. The level of reciprocal communication between representatives of political parties and social media users is still a matter for debate but despite the contestations various political entities variably utilise these platforms to interact with and push information to citizens. It should be noted that this interactivity is the hallmark of social media. Interactivity involves user engagement with information and with other users. These online tools allow people to communicate, collaborate and openly share information, thereby bringing to the fore the power and agency of citizens to make political contributions.

South Africa provides an encouraging case in which social media have been leveraged by various political entities, such as the government and political parties,

to stimulate citizen participation. The South African government has adopted various social media platforms as information channels. For example, the presidency runs an official and verified Twitter page 'PresidencyZA'; a Facebook page, 'The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa'; a YouTube channel 'PresidencyZA Channel'; and a Flickr photo-account, titled 'The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa's Photostream'.³⁹ Similarly, other national institutions and government ministries, such as the National Planning Commission (NPC) (Facebook page), also have their own social media channels. These platforms provide citizens with information on government initiatives and facilitate interaction with the presidency and ministries. Citizens can post comments and pose questions on political matters of interest.

Interactivity involves user engagement with information and with other users

Political parties in South Africa have also utilised social media to facilitate engagement with citizens. The Democratic Alliance (DA) has run an extensive social media programme. In 2009, the DA launched a social media campaign and, according to Helen Zille, the Western Cape Premier and leader of the DA, this new digital strategy will continue to reach South African voters in exciting and groundbreaking ways 'to build a personalised relationship with the DA's supporters by involving them in our activities and campaigns'.⁴⁰ The DA's social media strategy also includes text message communication, mobile web access and engagement with voters through social media and the blogosphere. Zille is undoubtedly one of the biggest Twitter users in the country, with 112 338 followers and 8 098 tweets (as of 16 February 2012).⁴¹ Zille tweets frequently and actively engages with supporters and non-DA followers, answering their questions and providing information on various party and government initiatives. Similarly, Cape Town City Mayor Patricia de Lille (494 tweets and 9 157 followers) and Lindiwe Mazibuko, the leader of the opposition in the South African Parliament (with 380 tweets and 20 017 followers), both from the DA, also actively engage with citizens and command a large following on Twitter.⁴² Given the growing reach of Twitter in South Africa and the increasing adoption of other social media, these platforms are likely to be more widely used for political engagement in the near future. However, despite such promising trends, considering the demographic nature

of Internet access in South Africa concerns over the digital divide still exist.⁴³

Social media also possess the potential to facilitate citizens' engagement with institutions. A pertinent example is the Mzalendo initiative in Kenya that plays the role of watchdog over Kenya's parliament. Mzalendo has a detailed website that keeps track of the activities of Kenyan MPs. The information on the website is streamlined on the Mzalendo blog⁴⁴ <http://www.mzalendo.com/blog/>, Facebook and Twitter. The website primarily provides information on parliamentary motions, bills, MPs' profiles and other parliamentary activities. The platforms used facilitate citizens' participation through their comments, questions and deliberations on parliamentary activities. There is extensive user engagement on the Mzalendo Facebook page. Users post comments and provide links to news stories relating to parliamentarians. For example, the issue of Kenyan MPs who were refusing to pay taxes generated significant interest on social media, particularly on the Mzalendo Facebook page, where users posted messages in an attempt to pressure the MPs to be accountable and pay their taxes. While it is difficult to quantify or confirm the direct impact of the campaign, these examples of user engagement with social media to contribute to political conversations underline the quintessential role of these communicative tools in facilitating citizens' political involvement.

CHALLENGES IMPEDING SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN AFRICA: SELECTED CASES

Although social media provide the potential to facilitate political participation, there is a need to be cautiously optimistic in touting this potential, as a number of challenges exist in the context within which the platforms are being used. Various factors impinge on participation depending on the specific context in which the platforms are being utilised. These include countries' historical experiences, institutional arrangements and socioeconomic and political conditions. These factors have an impact on the nature of the political participation that can be facilitated via social media. Considering that countries are fundamentally different, a techno-realistic understanding of the relationship between social media and the conditions within which the technology exists is essential. However, inasmuch as the countries' contexts and specific conditions might be different, the phenomenon of social media distrust by some African governments cuts across the contextual boundaries.

It is also imperative to consider the harsh and often repressive political contexts that impede on citizens' potential to engage through these communicative tools. As discussed earlier, this paper argues that the primary challenge facing social-media-mediated participation

is the increasing distrust of these platforms by various autocratic regimes. Such regimes have blocked, censored and/or threatened to block or intercept the use of these platforms. Indeed, in addition to these strategies of filtering and regulating online content, some governments have proceeded to impose punitive measures on those 'guilty' of contravening the relevant laws.

Uganda

The role of social media in facilitating the Ugandan protests, and the government's subsequent retaliatory crackdown on protesters and users of these platforms, provides an interesting example of the growing phenomena of social media panic or distrust in Africa. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs written within and outside Uganda played a fundamental role in driving the April 2011 'walk-to-work' protests. The protests were ignited by deteriorating living standards for ordinary Ugandans, caused by the high inflation rate attributed to Museveni's perceived poor governance record, which has been characterised by a highly personalised style of ruling, corruption and mismanagement of state resources. Opposition parties and civil society groups have been operating in a repressive context characterised by violations of the freedoms of assembly and expression, and the commonplace arbitrary arrest of opposition members.⁴⁵ Against this background, it is not surprising that ordinary citizens, opposition groups and civil society organisations striving to circumvent the government's restrictions on their right to peaceful demonstrations resorted to social media platforms to air their grievances and organise protests.

For example, the group A4C adopted social media tools to drive protests during both the first phase of the April 'walk-to-work' protests and the second-phase October 2011 demonstrations. During these 'walk-to-work' protests, Ugandans were mobilised through political blogs, Facebook and Twitter, and these platforms gave impetus to the protests.

The Ugandan government authorities reacted by imposing a ban on these protests and summarily arresting and detaining activists and protesters. Similarly, to thwart the role and impact of social media platforms in facilitating these protests, the regime employed various strategies. For example, in April 2011 at the height of the 'walk-to-work' protests, the government suspended the use of social networks, although the regime denies doing so. According to reports, the Uganda Communications Commission wrote to service providers requesting them to 'block the use of Facebook and Twitter' and 'to eliminate the connection and sharing of information that incites the public'.⁴⁶ Consequently, the April and October 'walk-to-work' protests lost their momentum, which can be attributed to government interventions. The default explanation regimes

give to justify their anti-social-media strategies is that the platforms incite public disorder and regulating the platforms is essential to protect national security.

Zimbabwe

Although Zimbabwe has not overtly blocked or censored the use of social media platforms, the government's distrust of these communicative tools is evident. It should be noted that the Zimbabwean political environment is not conducive to open citizen participation. Free speech and the freedoms of expression, association and assembly are heavily curtailed. Citizens who publicly express political opinions critical of the establishment are regularly subjected to arrest or harassment. The regime has enacted a plethora of laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Miscellaneous Offences Act, which severely limit public debate and criticism of government.⁴⁷ This heavy regulation of the political space curtails citizens' right to freely participate and debate pertinent political issues.

It should be noted that the Zimbabwean political environment is not conducive to open citizen participation

The potential of social media to encourage political involvement has not been realised in Zimbabwe, largely as a result of the government's strategies, which inhibit citizens' engagement with these tools. The most pertinent case of blatant citizen harassment over the use of social media platforms is the case of Vikas Mavhudzi, who was arrested in Bulawayo in March 2011 and accused of trying to overthrow the government using Facebook. Mavhudzi's arrest came after he posted a message, on Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Facebook page, that referred to the popular protests in Egypt that led to the demise of Mubarak's administration. The message read: 'I am overwhelmed; don't know what to say Mr PM. What happened in Egypt is sending shockwaves to all dictators around the world. No weapon but unity of purpose. Worth emulating, hey.'⁴⁸ Mavhudzi was charged with inciting instability by encouraging an unconstitutional change of government. However, the case was withdrawn in September 2011 after the state failed to provide evidence forming the basis of the alleged criminal offence. It is clear that the government was attempting to intimidate and deter citizens from engaging with these communicative tools to express their political liberties.

Likewise, 46 people, including Munyaradzi Gwisai, a labour activist and former legislator in Zimbabwe, were arrested and charged with treason or with attempting to overthrow the government by unconstitutional means, after convening a meeting in which they watched videos of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia and discussed their implications on the situation in Zimbabwe. Forty of the activists were later freed due to insufficient evidence against them while the remaining six were offered bail by high court judge Samuel Kudya, who described the evidence against the six as unsubstantiated.⁴⁹ In the ruling Judge Kudya said, 'I see no iota of evidence that any Zimbabwean ever contemplated any Tunisian or Egyptian revolution.'⁵⁰ This statement indicates that these arrests were politically motivated and meant to dissuade people from copying protests in the Arab world.

Angola

The Angolan government has demonstrated apprehension over the potential of social media to facilitate protests. Against the backdrop of the protests in North Africa, some Angolan citizens attempted to follow suit but the police thwarted the planned protests in March 2011. The opposition groups, activists and disgruntled youths intended to express their discontent with the regime's perceived lack of respect for their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly enshrined in the constitution, unemployment, corruption and social and economic marginalisation of the majority of citizens. Interestingly, following the failed protests, the Angolan parliament proceeded to pass a bill tightening control over the flow of information using new technological tools in the country. This law allows the regime to 'intercept or block communications and retain data from servers and any other personal computers without prior authorisation from a court. It would also make it illegal to use recording, video and photography without authorisation, even if the material was produced legally.'⁵¹ Indeed, as Daniel Bekele, Africa Director at Human Rights Watch, noted, the law would heavily curtail citizen participation and 'would extend and deepen the existing restrictions in Angola's media environment to the Internet, where many Angolans have turned for open debate on matters the government wants to restrict'.⁵²

Despite the inhibiting legislation, it is interesting to note that Angolan youths engaged with social media and text messaging to organise antigovernment protests following the failure of the March 2011 demonstrations.⁵³ The youths, with no defined political affiliation, organised a series of antigovernment street protests facilitated by text messaging and social media sites like Facebook and YouTube. The role of social media in facilitating the youths' political action has been widely acknowledged. According

to Medil Campos (25), one of the protest organisers and a member of the group Central Angola 7311, Facebook and other social platforms continue to facilitate the mobilisation of the youths, and these platforms, he argues, have been instrumental in providing an alternative forum for sharing information outside of the state-controlled and heavily censored traditional media.⁵⁴ Central Angola has maintained a strong online presence through its Facebook page,⁵⁵ blog, YouTube channel and Twitter account. The figures 7311 represent the dates of the first protest organised in Angola, which occurred on 7 March 2011, hence the name Central Angola 7311. On its blog, the group states that it aims 'to be a forum for exchange of arguments and to initiate proposals for the development of democracy in Angola, based on the active participation of citizens and freedom of expression ... [and] act as central information and mobilisation for future meetings, both in Angola and in the diaspora'.⁵⁶

It is interesting to note that, despite the government strategies to limit citizen participation, Angolan citizens, especially the youth, have showed no signs of retreating. Since the March 2011 protests, there have been six protests staged with assurances from various youth movements of more protests. Thus, the role of various online communicative tools to facilitate future political activities remains vital. Similarly, considering the country's political context, as the Human Rights Watch has noted, the use of the Internet and social media by citizens, journalists, and human rights activists and opposition parties is likely to become increasingly important in Angola as a means of circumventing the longstanding restrictions on traditional media.⁵⁷

Cameroon

The role of social media remains particularly relevant in Cameroon considering its heavy government restrictions on citizens' involvement in political activities. The government has continued to restrict the activities of citizens, political opponents and media practitioners. The regime has stifled freedom of association and assembly. According to Amnesty International, freedom of expression and peaceful political activities of citizens and civil society groups are similarly subject to official sanction.⁵⁸

Cameroon has also experienced social media jitters following the Arab Spring protests. At the height of the protests in March 2011, the Cameroonian government ordered the mobile operator MTN to suspend its Twitter SMS service and the service was blocked for ten days, for reasons of 'national security'. Twitter authorities in the US verified that this service had been suspended by the Cameroonian government. The MTN's head of information, Georges Mpoudi, posted this tweet on the day of the suspension: 'We can't comment further than "security

reasons” on #government instructions for #SMSTweets suspension.⁵⁹ During the protest movements in Egypt, a related service helped protesters to circumvent the government Internet and SMS blackout through sending Twitter messages by leaving a voicemail on a specific number. MTN Cameroon has provided this Twitter SMS service since November 2010, which allows users (through SMS/text messaging or with a third party application) to receive Tweets via SMS from people they follow, and also to post updates to Twitter from their phone through the short code 8711.⁶⁰ However, following the Arab Spring, the service was temporarily suspended, a move heavily criticised by activists as an attempt to prevent citizens from protesting against President Paul Biya’s government.

CONCLUSION

Social-media-driven protests in the Arab world since December 2010 have highlighted several roles of social media use in relation to political participation in Africa. The ways the various platforms were successfully employed have demonstrated the potential of an alternative online sphere, which can enable and drive various forms of citizen political participation. As Narnia Bohler-Muller and Charl van der Merwe have noted, social media has enhanced the role of this public space, facilitating social interaction, information sharing, and fast and easy communication.⁶¹ Social media have given credence to and extended Habermas’ notion of the importance of the public sphere.⁶² These communicative platforms have afforded various actors the opportunity to play out political engagement and activism on multiple online spherules. The significance of social media has opened up new possibilities for citizens to engage with each other and with their political representatives, and contribute towards an inclusive and broad-based political process.

It has been argued that access to, and the provision of, information has the potential to stimulate political engagement and help citizens make more informed political decisions. However, as this paper has noted, the citizens’ engagement with these platforms is not without limitations or challenges. The contexts within which the platforms facilitate citizen involvement are characterised by myriad socioeconomic and political challenges, which impede on the full (and equal) exploitation of online platforms. Limits to freedom of expression related to media freedom, freedom of information and freedom of assembly restrict the free use of social media tools and will have a negative impact on citizens’ ability to participate in, and may marginalise them from, the political sphere. Social media thus provide the potential to circumvent these limitations to access and provision of information. However, this possibility may be hindered by the fact that social media are often circumscribed by the same regulations that influence the

freedoms of information, expression and assembly. These platforms are not immune to offline limitations but it may be more difficult (though not impossible) to monitor (online surveillance), survey or limit virtual political participation on social media networks than it is to do so in the offline world.

NOTES

- 1 At the time this paper was completed, Arthur Chatora was a research intern in the African Conflict Prevention Programme at the ISS Pretoria office. He holds an MA in Journalism and Media Studies from Rhodes University, South Africa. The author is grateful to Dr Issaka K. Souaré and Richard Perry of the ISS, as well as to the anonymous external reviewer, for their critical comments that helped improve the quality of this paper.
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