

STORIES OF STRUGGLE AND INSPIRATION

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- *How Africans are rising for justice, peace and dignity in the context of shrinking civic space*

ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview of activists of the Africans Rising movement who participated in a pilot retreat for a month in Arusha, northern Tanzania. It gave them the opportunity to examine and share the strategies that they employ to deal with the restrictions on civil society seen across Africa. Africans Rising is a nascent, rapidly growing, self-identifying collective of social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), artists, sports people, cultural activists and others. The retreat was a meeting of east, west, south and north Africa and showcased the diversity and richness of the people of Africa with activists from Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda.

KEYWORDS

African Activists in Residence | Africans Rising | Strategies | Shrinking | Civic Space

“Those who are on good terms with the government work freely but those against the government are harassed, jailed, beaten and sometimes even killed. But even in this repressive environment there are now many youth movements. [At times] it is difficult to collaborate because we are suspicious of each other, that some might be working on behalf of the government, the opposition or a foreign country, but I believe that because we are fighting for the same cause for a better country, we will be able to collaborate in the future,” said Sylva Mbikayi when describing how difficult it is working in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) at the beginning of the Activists-in-Residence (AiR) programme.¹

Sylva Mbikayi, or as he told the group, “I am affectionately called Legrand”, was part of a group of African activists who had converged in Arusha, northern Tanzania, to see how they can advance social justice in a continent where the space to do so is shrinking. The AiR programme is a practical response to the multiple struggles and demands in the activists’ day-to-day lives as human rights defenders. Through their interactions, the programme aimed to strengthen the infrastructure for societal transformation as well as to provide time and space for reflection, especially for those who face repression or those who might be on the verge of burnout.

AiR was an initiative of Africans Rising, a Pan-African movement of people and formations, working for peace, justice and dignity.² The movement is determined to foster an Africa-wide solidarity and unity of purpose to build the future Africans want – a right to peace, social inclusion and shared prosperity. Ezra Mbogori of Kenya and Kumi Naidoo of South Africa have both been involved in the development of the movement. They agree that African unity, reflected by greater social, political and economic integration, is critical for Africa and its peoples, nations and nationalities. A united civil society should be the vanguard of such a movement for justice, peace and dignity. The AiR was advancing Ezra’s and Kumi’s narratives.

The initiative was timely given the reality in various African countries where elections have been annulled and constitutions are not being respected or are being changed to accommodate personal wishes. Such scenarios are being resisted by those who met in Arusha, who believe in human rights and in building peaceful, just and tolerant societies. However, because each operated in a different context and had different strategies to respond to the restrictions on their civic spaces, the AiR programme gave them the opportunity to merge these strategies and leave the retreat stronger.

“For my entire education, from primary school to university, I had to move from my desk to the blackboard because I could not see and no one cared that being a person with Albinism, I could not see small fonts,” said Franck Houètèhou C. Hounsa as he told the group what motivated him to fight for the rights of people with Albinism.

Speaking about civil society in Benin, Franck says that, “while I have no definition of civil society in Benin, I know that we have trade unions, faith based organisations - made up of Christian, Muslim and the traditional religion, Vudoun - and NGOs. These three bodies

are very vibrant and strong in Benin. They work separately but sometimes unite against government directives. For example, when the government said that Muslims should not worship on the streets on the Friday, it was the Catholics that came out first to protest against the directive and the government retracted.” This was an example, one of many that were discussed during the course of the retreat, of how alliances between different groups and social movements make a real difference when faced with repressive legislation.

Legrand, who was released from military detention a week before attending AiR, spoke of the situation in his country, “In DR Congo there is the government and the opposition. There are [very] few non-partisan civil society formations because the organisations in the civil society are either with the government or with the opposition and they aspire to be in one of those two camps, they don’t really care for the people, they think about themselves first.”

Legrand, whose release came about thanks to international and national pressure as well as lobbying from family members and friends, denied accusations of being in a movement that was planning a *coup*, insisting “we just want democracy, real democracy that is all.” In 2013 it was that need for democracy that led the youth movement in the DRC to form the Fourth Way. Legrand explains the name, “the first path is the regime, the second path is the opposition and the third path is the civil society. But because the civil society in DRC does not adequately represent the aspirations of the people, we are the Fourth Path, which represents the youth. The movement came into being when President Kabila started talking about organising a dialogue for the elections. We were opposed to this dialogue because we knew he was preparing a way to extend his tenure in office beyond 2016 when his second term would end,” he says. And so we see another tactic being used to resist the shrinking of society – movement building.

Legrand explains that, in order to make the movement closer to the people, they take part in community activities such as cleaning the streets, providing free access to justice, assisting market women with materials and equipment, working with the handicapped and offering university scholarships to eligible youth. In addition, the movement has meetings and consultations with the opposition. The decision to maintain communication with opposition groups proved successful when, in 2014, some leaders of the opposition joined the movement and refused to enter into the dialogue that President Joseph Kabila was demanding. But this did not deter the president and he again made the call for a dialogue in 2015 “so we sent letters to [the United Nations and the European Union] and said ‘No, this is not what the Congolese people want’. But they did not take our letters seriously, so we became radical and sent out messages on social media saying we will create ‘chaos’ on the streets to stop people attending the dialogue. We were finally taken seriously,” he says.

Mbongo Ali, a lawyer activist from Burundi who heads a human rights NGO, *Via-Volonté*, meaning “where there is a will there is a way”, says that before 2015 civil society in his country was vibrant. “In fact Burundi was among the top five African countries in which the civil society had the space to work freely. But since the April

2015 demonstrations against the third term of President Pierre Nkurunziza, things have gone from bad to worse. Apart from the demonstrations there was a failed *coup* and President Nkurunziza said that civil society was part of the *coup* attempt so all civil society organisations were banned and all activists were put on a list of enemies of the state. According to the constitution, civil society is allowed to operate but [in practice] the government has decided to close the civic space” says Mbongo.³

In April this year, Mbongo was arrested in Tanzania after he had gone to there to demonstrate for the rights of Burundian ethnic minorities. Mbongo Ali says that the situation in Burundi makes it hard to work. “We are in a sort of civil war – when you say or do anything against the government you are an enemy of the state; if you say or do anything that the opposition does not like you also become their enemy and if you work with people outside Burundi you are deemed to be working with the enemy. You are always in danger.”

In such circumstances, he explains that the best way for his organisation and others to resist is to have discussions with some leaders and to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to show that freedom of expression and association is a constitutional right. “It is important to speak about human rights and democracy as well as peace which my country has a problem achieving.”

Just as Ali sees dealing with discrimination as his call to human rights activism, Julie Weah from Liberia has a passion “to see the condition of women change, for them to speak out and to be seen as people who can make a contribution in a society that is very patriarchal.”

Julie, or *Madame Presidente* as she was called in honour of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman president in Africa who is Liberian, heads the Foundation for Community Initiative FCI. It works mostly with women to increase their participation in natural resource governance and management. She explains that civil society in Liberia is based around thematic areas such as natural resources, transparency and accountability, service provision like health, water, sanitation, and trade unions. The various Liberian civil society organisations benefit from an umbrella organisation, the National Civil Society Council of Liberia, which seeks to “coordinate the activities of civil society organizations in Liberia”.⁴

She says that generally there are no restrictions on civil society. However, this is not always the case, for example if an issue is deemed morally or socially unacceptable, such as LGBTI rights or if the issue is likely to generate much opposition to the government’s position. “There was a reform in the forestry sector to produce a new law and civil society organisations dealing with land issues were able to participate fully but those opposed to the way it is being handled were not listened to and are thus excluded from a democratic process. Another example being the referendum process currently underway on whether Liberia should be declared a Christian country. Some civil society organisations will be allowed participate while others will not depending on whether they agree or disagree with the government position. To deal with such situations we dialogue and have continuous engagement with relevant stakeholders.”

The time at the AiR was also for reflection and to energise for the next hurdle – itself a strategy to guarantee that activists have sufficient energy to focus on their work. Otieno Ombok who when speaking about the situation in Kenya said, “CSOs are vigilant on constitution and other legislation protecting human, civil and socio-economic rights. We have trained about 2,000 community human rights defenders directly [on these issues]. When we observe violations we report them to constitutional bodies like the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, Independent Police Oversight Authority, the National Gender Commission, and the Ombudsman. These bodies have summoned the various executives including the police for questioning.”

The *Wise One* as Otieno Ombok was known, said that Kenyan CSOs also petition the presidency and the parliament through the majority leader and encourage the general public to petition and go to court to seek redress. These strategies have resulted in favourable rulings in the past, especially after the constitution was reformed to have an independent judiciary, demonstrating that mass mobilisation including protests still have the ability to influence parliaments in certain contexts.

Amina Terras from Morocco is a member of the Union of Students for the Change of the Educational System. This movement was formed by students who were unhappy with the existing education system, “this is because people were having difficulty accessing the disciplines they wanted to follow because of the selective nature of the education system as well as the privatisation of the education system. The system of education in both the private and public sectors has brought segregation as it made education accessible [only] to the upper middle class. Education should bring about emancipation and not social progression of those who are already privileged,” she says with the passion that makes her take to the streets for what she calls “popular university”.

She explains that her movement, which started in 2012, and which has now changed its name to *Tilila*, meaning liberty or light from the indigenous Amazigh language, followed the Arab Spring. “Following [the Arab Spring uprisings in Morocco] there was more space for civil society because the government was obliged [to be more open] due to the political situation; it was that or more demonstrations. But we have not been able to register the organization because in an indirect way the government does not want us to have a legal status. We took this matter to the Administrative Court and in 2015 we won our case against the government. But the government appealed and in 2016 it won against us. So we changed the name of the organisation and the leaders’ names but we are still not permitted to register, so we continue without legal status,” she shrugs, smiling. Organising groups informally – and thereby flying under the radar of repressive governments – is an increasingly cited strategy in fighting back against civil society restrictions.

In the environment that Amina finds herself, it is hard to survive. But she has found allies who, because they are no longer permitted to hold street gatherings, give them space in their compounds. And she is optimistic, “I am hopeful, not in the change of the regime but in social

change, that people will look at the root of the problem and gather and find their own solutions. This is what the state does not want, but when the people become affirmative and demand change that will be the end of the legitimacy of the current regime,” she ends with a nod.

Another informal movement that is making headway in reclaiming civic space is the Senegalese social movement, the *Y'en a Marre*, which means Fed Up. It consists of a group of Senegalese rappers and journalists – music and the power of social media are popular communication tools that are being used to appeal to the Senegalese youth in their quest for democracy and to reclaim civic space. The movement was started in 2011 to protest against an ineffective government, mobilise youth to register to vote and to embrace a new type of thinking and living termed “The New Type of Senegalese” or NTS following President Wade’s attempt to have a third term and to put in place mechanisms for his son to succeed him. “So when the president was due to present his proposal to government we were there in front of the parliament on 23 June protesting so his proposal did not pass,” says Ngone Ngom of Senegal.

Ngone says the 2011 protest led to the wider recognition of *Y'en a Marre*. She explains that, “in Senegal there are two types of civil societies. One like *Y'en A Marre*, which is always hostile to the government because it stands for the rights of the people and raises awareness on issues that people need to take into account. And the other that is pro-government and with which the government wants to work.”

Despite these differences, Ngone, who also works for the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), explains that there are times when all civil society comes together. She gives an example of the elections earlier this year. Many areas were unable to vote due to lack of materials and disorganisation as well as a blackout during the announcement of the results and soldiers coming in to take the ballot boxes. “We made a statement and together called for ‘the hold up of elections’. Though the elections were not nullified we made our point,” says Ngone.

Pepe, a smartly dressed gentleman of a quiet disposition explains the kind of space in which the LGBTIQ community in Uganda must operate. Individuals must endure forced sex to make them become what is considered normal; they are coerced into marriage while others are raped by family members or other men to teach them a “lesson”. Others are expelled from school because their parents refuse to pay school fees and some are disowned for refusing to conform to what society wants. Some are fired from their jobs, and kicked out of churches as you are not considered to belong. Many face violence from community and police when, for example, upon entering a shop, the shopkeeper shouts and people come and beat up the individual. Usually when the police arrive it is the victim and not the perpetrators who is charged. Pepe himself was arrested and beaten unconscious last year. He was later released through his tweets on social media, which encouraged interventions by friends and colleagues.

In terms of reclaiming the space for the LGBTIQ community to operate, Pepe explains that as well as using social media “we get into coalitions and networks because we share

the burden of being oppressed and together we can reclaim our constitutional guaranteed rights. And specifically for the LGBTIQ community we also collaborate with other issues in the society such as those working on the Right to Education and the Right to Parenting, because these are issues that relate to young people. Through such collaborations we are creating acceptance and slowly gaining ground.”

Africans Rising also sees many of its followers living abroad, which explains Abdi Muse’s presence at the retreat. From Somaliland but living in the United Kingdom (UK), he is an active member of the Somaliland diaspora and assists in the integration of refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea in the UK. Of his homeland he says, “I am extremely concerned about the election delays and the shrinking civic space taking place in Somaliland. So far the government has twice delayed the elections that were originally set to take place on June 2015. Questions on the legality of these delays have been met with continuous restrictions of any public criticism of the government or policies, by regularly detaining journalists, human right defenders or any dissenting voices, with some resulting in criminal charges. The government has also restricted public assemblies under the pretext of keeping public order and when demonstrations do take place security forces have in the past used excessive force against demonstrators. The restrictions by the Somaliland government on freedoms of speech, press, assembly and association, has made it difficult for citizens to organise themselves and create strong civil movements that can hold the government accountable.”

Abdi says that aside from the restrictions he sees in Somaliland, he also sees many challenges facing civil society groups in London due to the shrinking resources, “successive UK governments have implemented funding cuts on public services and for organisations that work with refugees. This has created a huge impact on how we as community activists support and help refugees. The hostile media and the public opinion on migration, has also created a challenging environment to operate.”

He says he constantly has to try to find ways to help refugees, by engaging and working collaboratively with other voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. “Through this ability to create a collective stand we have campaigned and advocated to raise awareness about the effect the government funding cuts have had on the lives of refugees. Through these partnerships I have successfully been able to signpost refugees to access services of partner organisations.”

And so the participants of AiR were different but the same. They were from different countries but all are facing the same challenge of operating in an ever shrinking civic space. These activists who at one time or other have been harassed or imprisoned had time, through the different lectures and their interactions with each other at the retreat, to acknowledge and understand the power of building coalitions, collaborations, alliances and movements as well as making themselves relevant right from the grassroots all the way to national level. It was with these strategies in mind that they left the retreat.

There will be challenges in working together, but unity of purpose is their strength and the power to succeed. With the network they have also built, these Ambassadors of Africans Rising return to their countries to aptly apply the African proverb that says, “If you want to walk fast, walk alone, if you want to walk far, walk with others”. Together they will now be walking stronger in the quest of Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity and protect and reclaim civic space in their respective countries.

NOTES

1 • Co-sponsored by the Fund for Global Human Rights and hosted by the Danish Training Center for Development Cooperation (MS- TCDC).

2 • For more information, see: Africans Rising, Homepage, accessed November 14, 2017, <http://www.africans-rising.org/www/>.

3 • Civil society organisations are considered the enemies of the democracy by the government. This recent statement made on 13 May 2017 can be read on the official website of the Presidency: “Message du Gouvernement du Burundi À L’occasion de La Commémoration de

L’échec de La Tentative de Coup d’Etat du 14 Mai 2015 – (Deux Ans Après),” Présidence de la République du Burundi, May 13, 2017, accessed November 14, 2017, <https://www.presidence.gov.bi/2017/05/13/message-du-gouvernement-du-burundi-a-loccasion-de-la-commemoration-de-lechec-de-la-tentative-de-coup-detat-du-14-mai-2015-deux-ans-apres/>.

4 • For further information see: “About NCSCL,” The National Civil Society Council of Liberia, January 11, 2017, accessed November 14, 2017, <http://ncscliberia.org/%22about%20us%22>.

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Valerie Msoka is one of the founder members of the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) which started as a response to the treatment of women in the newsrooms and the portrayal of women in the media. It has since evolved into a powerful media advocacy organisation that works towards gender equality.

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