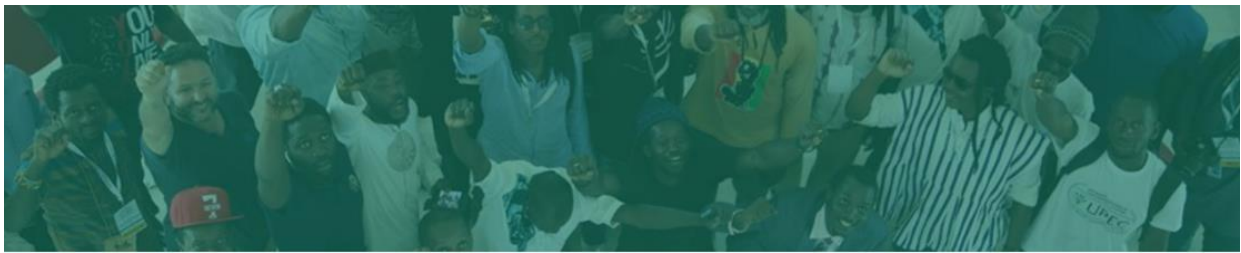


# “Urban Youth, the Generation Gap and Reinventing Political Connection in Sub-Saharan Africa”

## The Collectives of Citizens And their Leading figures



A study coordinated by  
by Claire Kupper and Michel Luntumbue (GRIP)  
with the support of Knowledge Platform  
Security & Rule of Law (Knowledge Management Fund)



|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Table des matières</b>   |           |
| <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>1. Structural and Economic Factors in a Decade of Revolt</b>                         | <b>6</b>  |
| 1.1. A Young and Changing Continent   | 6         |
| 1.2. Urbanity and the Emergence of the Middle Classes                                   | 9         |
| 1.3. Generational divide and youth political representation                             | 11        |
| <b>2. Social Movements, Citizen Movements and Reinventing Political Connections</b>     | <b>12</b> |
| 2.1. Social Movements and Generational Cycles   | 12        |
| 2.2. Movements' and Activists' Profiles and Characteristics                             | 14        |
| 2.3. New Citizen Practices and Community Activism                                       | 16        |
| 2.4. Citizen Movements' Challenges and Perspectives                                     | 17        |
| <b>3. Interview with Citizen Movement Collectives and Leading Figures</b>               | <b>19</b> |
| Interview with Gilles Yabi (Wathi Citizen Think Tank)                                   | 19        |
| Entretien avec Floribert Anzulini, coordonnateur du collectif<br>FILIMBI                | 21        |
| Entretien avec Fred Bauma   | 28        |
| Interview with Alpha Diallo, President of the ABLOGUI<br>Executive Board                | 35        |
| Interview with Ousmane Miphah Lankoande, Balai citoyen<br>Executive Secretary           | 42        |
| Interview with Abdoulaye Diallo, SENS Movement  | 46        |
| Interview with Martial PA'NUCCI   | 49        |
| Interview with N' Dongo Samba Sylla   | 55        |
| Farida Nabourema, Human Rights Defender and Coordinator<br>of the Togolese Civic League | 58        |
| The Position of Women in the Movements' Leadership                                      | 60        |
| <b>Conclusions</b>  | <b>62</b> |
| <b>Recommendations</b>  | <b>63</b> |

## Introduction

Over the past decade, African youth<sup>1</sup> has become a key player in the socio-political transformation of the continent, often through its peaceful involvement in support of more inclusive and more democratic societies that go beyond institutional formalism.

Like the so-called movements involved in the Arab Spring (2010-2011) in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), Sub-Saharan Africa has also experienced an upsurge in different protest movements (from Senegal to Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)), led by a layer of its urban youth.

These young people are open to the world and are keen users of social networks for expressing their demands and building alliances. They are not just calling for greater opportunities and better socio-economic conditions, they embody, above all, new ways of doing politics and experiencing it<sup>2</sup>.

Although they represent the demographic majority in the continent, young people effectively remain those most affected by unemployment and are still insufficiently integrated into the political and economic development processes<sup>3</sup>. The difficulties of accessing education and jobs, compounded by a feeling of marginalisation and disaffection with the institutions and governments, are encouraging some young people to emigrate or indeed, to become radicalised<sup>4</sup>.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of young people on the continent are engaged in a process for the institutionalisation of their demands. This process has taken the shape of structured grassroots organisations such as “*Y'en a marre*” (YAM) in Senegal, “*Le Balai Citoyen*” in Burkina Faso and “*Filimbi*” and “*Lucha*” in the DRC.

Their non-violent mobilizations have had a significant impact on institutional developments in these countries by, for example, defeating unconstitutional attempts to extend presidential terms or implement unpopular policies. Despite the difficulties, grassroots movements have helped to expand the spaces available for civic expression.

At a more fundamental level, the emergence of the African social movements is also part of a cyclical logic of responses to systemic shocks. One historic turn of events included the 2008-2010 global food riots, which was already involving sections of young city dwellers<sup>5</sup>.

According to the geographer, Pierre Janin, this global multi-dimensional crisis “*provided a trial run for younger generations to assert themselves and get their voices heard*”<sup>6</sup>. Against a backdrop of growing inequality and democratic deficit, “*young people who felt their*

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1. Youth is a category with contours that vary according to specific African contexts. The notion of “youth” used in this research refers to the objective criterion of age defined by the African Youth Charter of 2006 and covers young people aged between 18 and 35 years old. It also takes into account, however, the generation gap in certain socio-cultural environments, between “social elders and juniors”, which fosters a form of status asymmetry that goes beyond the criterion of age alone.

2. Claire Kupper and Michel Luntumbue (authors), “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, *GRIP*, April 2017.

3. Ndong Samba Sylla, “Une jeunesse laissée pour compte : Les ‘cinq coléreuses’ secouent le Sénégal”, *Dakar Echo*, 31 March 2021.

4. “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, *UNDP*, 2017

5. Pierre Janin, “[Les ‘émeutes de la faim’ : une lecture \(géo-politique\) du changement \(social\)](#)”, *Politique étrangère*, 2009/2, p. 251-263.

6. *Idem*, page 261.

*generations were being sacrificed and subject to poor political representation, mobilised themselves strongly*<sup>7</sup>”.

In this respect, the emergence of the new African social movements at the turn of the century can also be analysed in terms of the “*generation gap*”, given that this has also taken the shape of the struggle against several consecutive presidential terms and the monopolisation of power by the generations born before or around the time of independence<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, in addition to the pro-democracy movements’ label and political change highlighted by the media, the main issue at the heart of the new citizen movements remains the transformation of governance<sup>9</sup>. This involves, “*working towards the implementation of public management mechanisms for the benefit of all*<sup>10</sup>”.

Recent indications and events, however, particularly the restrictive measures taken in the context of tackling the COVID 19 pandemic or those involving policies combatting violent extremism, have exposed risks of autocratic regression in a number of countries and a shrinkage in the amount of space available for civic expression and participation<sup>11</sup>.

Social mobilisation and protest, however, in response to these developments also confirm the determination of the citizen movements to continue to take action to protect the democratic concessions and progress that have already been obtained. Similarly, the progressive networking of citizen movements through initiatives such as the UPEC (*Université Populaire de l’Engagement Citoyen*) and the Afrikki Platform<sup>12</sup>, highlight a goal to consolidate critical civic culture on a continental scale<sup>13</sup>.

**“Urban Youth, the Generation Gap and Reinventing Political Connection in Sub-Saharan Africa”** is a research project funded by the Knowledge Management Fund (KMF) and the Dutch Foreign Office Research Fund, overseen by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL).

This research looks at the evolution of the citizen movements in Sub-Saharan Africa and their adaptation to a changing context characterised by the growth in new forms of authoritarianism. It analyses the ability of these movements to “*re-politicise*” young people and mobilise them around objectives for societal change and innovation within civic and political practices (through their commitment to inclusive governance based on equality).

This involves analysing the extent to which innovative practices in these new citizen movements can contribute to “*reinventing political cooperation*” and reducing the generation gap and the marginalisation of African youth in the political arena, to ensure their effective socio-political participation.

This research also complements a previous GRIP study in 2017, which focused on the first phase of these emerging movements and their accompanying role in the

7. Pierre Janin, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

8. Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, “Gerontocracy in African Politics, Youth and the Quest for Political Participation”, *Journal of African Elections (JAE)*, 2018.

9. Online interview with *Laucha* activist Sylvain Saluseke, January 2022.

10. *Idem*.

11. “[Le pouvoir du peuple sous attaque](#)”, a report based on data in the *CIVICUS Monitor*, 2021.

12. [Le réseau des activistes d’Afrique et de ses diasporas](#).

13. “[L’UNESCO soutient l’Université populaire de l’engagement citoyen \(UPEC\) et la jeunesse engagée panafricaine](#)”, 16 December 2020.

political transition began in this decade<sup>14</sup>. The first phase in the emergence of these citizen movements mainly took the form of protest. The second phrase examined in this research is based on the hypothesis of a trajectory being taken by the citizen movements for putting forward proposals for a comprehensive transformation of society. It draws from ten different interviews carried out between May 2021 and January 2022, with activists and members of citizen groups from six French speaking countries (Burkina Faso, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Guinea Conakry, Senegal and Togo), in addition to African analysts who are well placed for observing the continent-wide socio-political dynamics.

The aim of this synthesis is divided into three parts. The first part highlights structural and contextual factors underpinning the emergence and trajectory of the social movements.

The second part provides a brief overview of the citizen organisations and profiles of individual activists. It also provides an outline for a typology of shared characteristics, major themes, strategies for action and the new dynamics, such as the beginning of a possible break with the initial apolitical stance of some grassroots organisations and activists.

The final part summarises the important points raised in the interviews and the subsequent recommendations.



The KPSRL's main objective is to improve learning and knowledge, especially among decision makers about public policies and programmes for improving human security and strengthening the rule of law.

The KMF supports events, research ideas, pilot projects and other innovative initiatives that help improve knowledge and policies in the human security domain and strengthen the rule of law, with a view to their subsequent adoption, particularly in a context of conflict and crisis

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14. "African Youth in Search of Change", *GRIP*, April 2017.

## 1. Structural and Economic Factors in a Decade of Revolt



*A demonstration by the Collectif Filimbi in Kinshasa (September 2020) – Source: Filimbi*

Prior to the demonstrations and urban riots of 2008 and 2010, few observers had been able to detect any signs of profound political and socio-cultural change in African societies, particularly those involving increased civic awareness among sections of the population, “*who are modernising more swiftly than the political cultures of their [...] respective states [and] who are seeking power and control of resources*”<sup>15</sup>.

In many countries, people are no longer reluctant to take to the streets to demand jobs and better wages. They are also monitoring the action of their leaders more closely, especially through the use of digital media<sup>16</sup>. Students, artists, unemployed graduates and the self-employed from the informal sector are mobilising in organisations that have a different rationale from the more “*mainstream*” civil society and socio-professional bodies<sup>17</sup>.

### 1.1. A Young and Changing Continent

The upsurge in new social and citizen movements in Sub-Saharan Africa correlates, above all, with the demographic youth factor and the overrepresentation of the latter in the age pyramid. It is also related to urbanity and, to a certain extent, the fact that the actors in these movements are part of the new emerging African middle classes<sup>18</sup>.

Africa has the youngest population in the world and highest rate of population growth on the planet. In 2020, approximately 60% of the African population was under the age of 25 and more than a third of them were aged between 15 and 34 years old.

15. The State of African Cities: Re-imagining sustainable Urban Transition, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2014, p. 27.

16. [Perspectives économiques en Afrique](#), OCDE-BAD, 2014, p. 119.

17. Claire Kupper, Michel Luntumbue *et al.*, “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, *op. cit.*

18. “Urbanité et gouvernance : mutation des villes et nouvelles formes de mobilisations politiques en Afrique équatoriale et centrale”, *GRIP*, 26 November 2015.

Those aged under 25 account for 60% of the population in Senegal, 65% in Burkina Faso and 66% in the DRC.<sup>19</sup> According to UN demographic forecasts, this population of young Africans is expected to increase from 447.1 million in 2019 to 1.3 billion people by 2100<sup>20</sup>. As a result, almost half of all young people in the world will be African by this date (46.3%)<sup>21</sup>.

This demographic exceptionalism is both a challenge and a source of opportunity for Africa. It has major implications for the economy, the provision of public services, as well as for the stability of African countries and society<sup>22</sup>. As recognised by the African Youth Charter<sup>23</sup> and the African Union's Agenda 2063, young people constitute an essential human capital resource and, “*the main asset for driving political, social, cultural and economic transformation on the continent*”<sup>24</sup>. The role played by youth in the wave of peaceful uprisings that have swept the continent since 2010, around demands for rights and governance reforms, is an illustration of this.

According to the *Ibrahim Forum Report* (2019), since 2008, African youth has benefited from, “*a significant improvement in education and health standards, which puts them in a better position than previous generations to advance human capital*”<sup>25</sup>. In many cases, the younger generation appears better informed, better equipped and better prepared than the generation of current leaders for tackling the challenges of a rapidly changing world<sup>26</sup>. Improvements in the sphere of Information Technology (IT) and digital infrastructure have particularly helped young Africans to grow up using technology<sup>27</sup>. Young Africans in the 15 - 24 age group are therefore 2.3 times more likely to use the Internet than the African population as a whole, as opposed to 1.3 times more likely than their counterparts in Europe<sup>28</sup>. According to the *Ibrahim Forum Report* (2019), this worldwide African youth connection, “*raises their expectations and exposes them to different realities, new opportunities and ideas that can bring innovation and motivation for change*”<sup>29</sup>.

Nonetheless, the youth in Africa are still confronted with many “*socio- economic and political circumstances that do not benefit young people and reduce the choices and opportunities available to them*”<sup>30</sup>.

Unemployment is the most serious problem facing young people in Africa, “*The youth unemployment rate is twice as high as that for the adult population in the majority of African countries*”

19. Data from the World Factbook, 2021.

20. Ibrahim Forum Report 2019, “Africa’s youth jobs or migration: Demography, economic prospects and mobility”, *Mo Ibrahim Foundation*, 2019.

21. *Idem*.

22. Landry Signé, “Africa youth leadership: Building local leaders to solve global challenges”, *Brookings*, 27 March 2019.

23. The African Youth Charter, adopted on 2 July 2006, aims to protect young people from discrimination and guarantees them freedom of movement, speech, association, religion, property and other human rights, while committing to promote their participation in society.

24. Agenda 2063 is a set of initiatives by the African Union aimed at transforming the continent in various areas including economic development, political integration, improving democracy and justice, establishing security and peace throughout the African continent, etc.

25. Ibrahim Forum Report 2019, *op. cit.*

26. Landry Signé, *op. cit.*, *idem*.

27. Ibrahim Forum Report 2019, *op. cit.*

28. *Idem*.

29. *Ibid*.

30. “A Study on the Role and Contributions of Youth to Peace and Security in Africa”, *African Union*, June 2020.

and 60% of the unemployed in Africa are young people<sup>31</sup>”. Despite the improved access of young people to education over the past decade, the latter's dissatisfaction with the provision and quality of education has increased, due to the disconnect between educational qualifications and job prospects.

According to data from the most recent *Afrobarometer* survey, published in early 2021, job creation (51%) and education (17%) are among the top priorities the 18–35-year-olds respondents said they would like African governments to take into account<sup>32</sup>. The *Ibrahim Forum Report* also points out that around 60% of Africans, especially young people, believe that, “their governments are doing a very bad or quite a bad job” of addressing young peoples’ needs<sup>33</sup>. According to a survey<sup>34</sup> carried out by the Institute for Governance and Development, which targeted young people in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Duïlasso, social and economic exclusion is a major reason for the frustration and discontent felt by young people in Burkina Faso<sup>35</sup>.

The detonators that led to the emergence of the main citizen movements (*Y'en a marre*, *Balai citoyen*, etc.) were the demands for social justice.

Despite the potential of young Africans for contributing to the economic and social progress of their societies, they remain under-represented in the field of governance and are excluded from the key decision-making processes. Barely 14% of Members of Parliament in Africa are aged under 40, whilst the discrepancy between the median age of the African population (19 years old) and that of its leaders (64) is around 45.<sup>36</sup> The observation that the national parliaments remain institutions closed off to the participation of young people is based on political, socio-cultural and institutional reasons. In Burkina Faso, *Le Balai citoyen* organization called for the adoption of a law in favour of a youth quota (30%) on the electoral lists during the 2020 general elections as part of an “*Alliance Jeunes et Parlementaires*” project. See below, point 1.3.

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31. “Youth Unemployment in Africa”, *African Capacity Building Foundation*, 2017.

32. *Afrobarometer*, “Africans say their governments are neglecting youth”, 12 January 2021. The *Afrobarometer* is an independent, non-partisan, pan-African survey and research project and network that conducts opinion polls across the African continent on citizens' attitudes towards democracy and governance, the economy, civil society and other issues.

33. Ibrahim Forum report, 2019.

34. The anthropologist Alcinda Honwana uses the concept of “waithood” to characterise the situation of prolonged awaiting or social impasse that many young people around the world experience as a result of socio-economic and political exclusion and declining future prospects. The revolt against this situation is one of the psychological factors of engagement in citizen movements. Alcinda Honwana, “Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa”, *African Arguments*, 12 August 2013.

35. “Les facteurs d'implication des jeunes dans la violence au Burkina Faso”, *IGD-GRIP*, January 2020.

36. *Idem*.



## 1.2. Urbanity and the Emergence of the Middle Classes

Cities and urban agglomerations have often provided a lever effect for industrial development and social mobility, owing to the concentration of production factors, infrastructure and services. They have also provided the catalysts for socio-cultural change, such as the diversification of knowledge, sources of information and the social practises they generate<sup>37,38</sup>. Urban areas account for almost 80% of global gross domestic product<sup>39</sup> and the equivalent percentage in terms of job creation. Many empirical examples, such as the trajectory of emerging countries, confirm a positive correlation between urbanisation and economic development.

Africa is also undergoing rapid urbanisation. According to data provided by *World Urbanization Prospects* (2018), the rate of urbanisation in Sub-Saharan Africa increased from 15% in 1960 to 42% in 2021. According to the OECDE (African Urbanisation Dynamics 2020), Africa is expected to have the fastest urban growth rate in the world by 2050. Much of this growth is taking place in small and medium-sized cities. In 2020, almost half of the population in Senegal and DRC was urban<sup>40</sup> (Senegal 48.122% - DRC 45.638%).

As the African population became increasingly urbanised over the course of this decade, the city was able to assert itself as the centre of gravity for political debate in Africa, particularly in countries undergoing democratic transition, as well as the arena citizens preferred for putting forward their demands for governance and accountability by the public authorities. As the anthropologist Benjamin Rubbers rightly points out, “*the city is indeed linked to specific demands, including demands for citizenship, wages, etc. The notion of citizenship derives from that of the city, the right to the city, which has a particular connotation in the postcolonial context*”<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, “*the city invites comparisons between living standards and access to social services. It is itself a mesh of social networks that can provide a basis for either mobilisation or contagion. Ultimately, it involves greater proximity to power, since it is difficult to exert pressure on a remote power, which only makes fleeting visits*”<sup>42</sup>.

Urbanization in Africa is also considered as one of the most unequal in the developing world. According to analysis on the future of African cities provided by the African Development Bank (AfDB) earlier this decade, “*The phenomenon of rapid urbanisation is putting enormous pressure on existing social and other essential services, which are already suffering from under-equipment, overcrowding and dilapidation*”<sup>43</sup>. As a result, “*many cities in Africa are*

37. “*Urbanity and governance: changing cities and new forms of political mobilisation in equatorial and central Africa*”, GRIP, 26 November 2015.

38. The Economic Radiance of African Cities, OECD, April 2022; “*World Urbanization Prospects*”, *Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations*, 2019.

39. Urban Development, World Bank, 14 April 2020.

40. *According to the definition: all persons domiciled in towns and villages of at least 1,000 inhabitants, whether or not these towns and villages are incorporated into municipalities (Usherbrooke)*. Percentage of population residing in urban areas of more than 1,000,000 (2020), Senegal 18.76%; Burkina Faso 13.301%; DRC 24.637%.

41. “*Urbanity and Governance: Urban Change and New Forms of Political Mobilisation in Equatorial and Central Africa*, *op. cit.* The theme of the right to the city, popularised by the geographer David Harvey, is aptly suited to the new forms of urban social protest, combining demands for greater well-being in the city and participation in urban management policies. The right to the city is not reduced to a right of individual access to the resources embodied in the city, but rather to a right that is more collective than individual, to exercise collective power over the processes of urbanisation. Capitalism versus the Right to the City: Neoliberalism, Urbanization, Resistance. Amsterdam Publishing, 2011.

42. *Idem.*

43. *Villes de l’Afrique et durabilité*, *Groupe de la Banque africaine de développement (BAD)*, mai 2013.

*characterised by a lack of adequate infrastructure and substandard housing conditions; weak and inefficient administrative structures; unsustainable institutional support; and inadequate public service delivery, distortion and inequality in consumption patterns*<sup>44</sup>.

Data compiled in an *Afrobarometer* survey of 16 African countries, which focused on health, education, water and sanitation, illustrate how most of the protests on the continent since the 2008 food and financial crisis and the 2011 “*Arab Spring*” have partly been related to the pitiful quality of services provided by the state<sup>45</sup>. Poor public services and low incomes are among the main reasons for provoking public anger. Increased social tension, however, and waves of protest also form part of an overall context of progressive democratic regression<sup>46</sup>.

In her analysis of the new wave of African social movements - of which the citizen movements are an expression - political scientist Lisa Mueller<sup>47</sup> states that these social movements are the result of a convergence between the expression of “*political grievances*”, mainly put forward by the middle classes, and “*the material grievances*” of the poorest sections of society.

Demographic transition has been characterised by the increasing urbanization of the predominantly rural populations in Africa. This transition has been accompanied by the emergence of the middle classes, whose social expression is expressed in new and different ways. The demands around which they mobilise range from improved governance to conventional political opposition, protests at an electoral level, the expression of new youth social categories and a more equal distribution of wealth<sup>48</sup>.

The parameters and size of this African middle class are at the heart of the debate between different experts. They define this social group according to a variety of different social criteria ranging from income, behaviour, habits, education and connectivity<sup>49</sup>. Lisa Mueller defines the middle class as, “*a layer of African society that satisfies its basic material needs from income derived from outside of the state*<sup>50</sup>”. This independence from the state is a decisive factor in the characterisation of a middle class that is free from a system of state patronage and whose members are more likely to be protest leaders.

By their level of education or their occupations, many of the leaders of the citizens' movements fit the criteria defining the profile of the new middle classes (journalists, engineers, lawyers, graduates, artists<sup>51</sup>). The conjunction of the political grievances of the latter and the material grievances expressed by the working classes allows Lisa Mueller to suggest that the middle classes, by virtue of their training and their communication and organisational skills, are predisposed to play the role of 'generals'

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44. *Idem*.

45. Political and Economic Governance in Africa, AfDB, 2014.

46. The State of Democracy in Africa and the Middle East 2021: Resilient Democratic Aspirations and Opportunities for Consolidation, *IDEA*, 22 November 2021.

47. Lisa Mueller, “Political Protest in Contemporary Africa”, *Cambridge University Press*, 2018.

48. “Urbanité et gouvernance : mutation des villes et nouvelles formes de mobilisations politiques en Afrique équatoriale et centrale”, *op. cit.*

49. “L’horizon temporel comme critère de définition de la classe moyenne en Afrique”, *Africa Retail News*, 10 January 2020. In 2011, the African Development Bank (AfDB) suggested that some 300 million Africans (30% of the continent's population) were middle class (based on the benchmark of daily consumption between \$2 and \$20).

50. Lisa Mueller, “Political Protest in Contemporary Africa”, p. 9.

51. See “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, *op. cit.*

of African social movements, while the poorer social strata act as 'foot soldiers'.<sup>52</sup> These protest dynamics are taking place in a context of non-inclusive economic growth and exacerbating inequalities.

### 1.3. Generational divide and youth political representation

The discrepancy between the median age of the African population and that of its leaders (45) exposes a conspicuous generation gap when it comes to accessing social-political prerogatives and opportunities. In his analysis, “*Gerontocracy in African politics*”<sup>53</sup>, Nigerian researcher, J. Olusegun, highlights the significant age difference between a number of African leaders, the average age in Africa and the demographic counterweight of young people in the continent. Although the analysis is based on a survey of students at the University of Cape Town, and the author is cautious about extrapolating his findings to the continent as a whole, he does suggest that the study may provide insights into the barriers to youth participation in other African countries.

The author suggests a number of different reasons for the obstacles to young people participating in politics, including:

- cultural pressure. In some African cultures a young person is never able to demonstrate that they have more knowledge than their elders; “*the elders are always right, irrespective of the circumstances*”. This “*extreme respect*” is an integral part of culture throughout the continent and creates a culture of silence amongst young people that sometimes leads to excessive authoritarianism by the older generation. According to J. Olusegun, this barrier is both consciously and unconsciously transposed into the political arena.
- Getting elected to political office in Africa requires a network of political relationships built over decades and organised according to community or religious affinities. Since youth status often extends into the mid-thirties and given the socio-economic constraints they face, young people do not have the time to build these kinds of influence networks.

According to the Greater Inclusion of African Youth in Public Service and Governance report, formal politics remains in the hands of mainly older males who exert both power and influence in society<sup>54</sup>.

The economic cost of elections and the amount of money needed to run for office in many countries on the continent automatically excludes young people, who are already affected by unemployment and over-represented in insecure jobs<sup>55</sup>. Sometimes young people are considered, wrongly, as being politically apathetic. They are less involved in electoral politics but more so in political activism<sup>56</sup>. In response to the political barriers to their participation, young people are involved in less mainstream and more alternative forms of political activism and participation, such as demonstrations, sit-ins and marches, etc. to express their demands and frustration. Joseph Olusegun

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52. Lisa Mueller, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

53. “Gerontocracy in African Politics: Youth and the Quest for Political Participation”, Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, 2018, Vol. 17, N° 1.

54. African Leadership Institute’s Project, African Union Office of the Youth Envoy UA/AFLI, Ford Foundation, July 2020.

55. “[La participation des jeunes aux processus politiques](#)”, IDEA, 2018.

56. “Gerontocracy in African politics: Youth and the Quest for Political Participation”, *op. cit.*

Adebayo's study also shows that the young respondents to his survey unanimously rejected the youth sections of the traditional political parties, which are often used as a political sop and which do not involve them in the political parties' decision-making process<sup>57</sup>.

As summarised in the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) report on youth participation in the political process, several factors explain the disaffection of young people with traditional forms of political participation. According to the report, these factors include, "*Patrimonialism, cynicism about politics and political parties, distrust of electoral institutions and processes, under-representation in government and political parties, favouritism and lack of financial resources, age limits imposed by the electoral code, and intergenerational differences, in addition to corruption and the use of illicit financial resources in politics*"<sup>58</sup>.

## 2. Social Movements, Citizen Movements and Reinventing Political Connections

### 2.1. Social Movements and Generational Cycles

According to Saïd Abbas Ahmed<sup>59</sup>, director of *Thinking Africa*, the lineage of the citizen movements in sub-Saharan Africa can be placed in a long cycle of time, which Peter Anyang' N'yong'o's book, "*Africa, the Long March to Democracy: Authoritarian State and Popular Resistance: Seven Studies*", published in 1988, traces back to the movements that predate the democratic demands of the early 1990s. These are often associated with the events in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The origins of the social movements in Sub-Saharan Africa can be located in the aftermath of the teachers' strikes in the 1980s. Democratic demands followed at the beginning of the 1990s, then a cycle of demands for better living conditions in the 2008-2010 period. Contagion ultimately occurred with the rejection of third presidential terms in West Africa. "*This crystallises with the Senegalese people foiling a third presidential term for Abdoulaye Wade, then the mobilisation of the people in Burkina Faso, after a long struggle that successfully overthrew Blaise Compaoré. The groundwork for overthrowing the regime in Burkina Faso was in fact prepared by Norbert Zongo<sup>60</sup> and Thomas Sankara, etc.*" The new citizen movements in Sub-Saharan Africa are not simply transpositions of the so-called Arab Spring movements in the MENA region. The artist and figurehead of the *Balai citoyen* grassroots movement, Smockey, recalls the slogan of the demonstrations against the Blaise Compaoré regime, "*When we took to the streets, we said Sankara's children had arrived and though you killed Sankara, you can do nothing against his children*"<sup>61</sup>.

According to Lisa Mueller, the new citizen movements constitute a third wave of social movements in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>62</sup>. The first wave, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, brought the decolonisation movement forth. The second wave, at the turn of the 1990s, promoted political and economic liberalisation. Finally, the third wave, as already mentioned, is the result of a combination of new political demands and mass protests against social inequalities. Abbas and Mueller share a diagnosis of the internal

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57. *Idem*.

58. [«La participation des jeunes aux processus politiques»](#), IDEA, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

59. Online interview, August 2021.

60. "Ce jour-là : le 13 décembre 1998, Norbert Zongo est assassiné au Burkina", *Jeune Afrique*, 13 décembre 2021.

61. Quoted in Saïd Abbas, online interview, August 2021.

62. Lisa Mueller, *op. cit.*

factors underpinning the emergence of the citizen movements in Sub-Saharan Africa: the aspiration of new urban social categories to participate politically and the mobilisation of the working classes around material grievances, to push forward an agenda of democratic reforms<sup>63</sup>.

In the first phase of their trajectory, the new citizen movements succeeded in preventing unconstitutional changes<sup>64</sup> and helped to overthrow authoritarian regimes<sup>65</sup>. In the wake of these upheavals, however, it became clear that radical transformation of political systems and states requires more than just a change of head of state or regime<sup>66</sup>. All the more so, as the context that followed the changeovers in Senegal, Burkina Faso, the DRC and Guinea seems to be accompanied, to some extent, by the risk of authoritarian regression or the restoration of the status quo for the benefit of the same traditional political class and its former practices<sup>67</sup>.

Indeed, although a 2019 *Afrobarometer* report on the state of democracy confirms the vast majority of Africans' commitment to democratic principles and their rejection of authoritarian alternatives<sup>68</sup>, there are also many signs of a deterioration in the quality of governance in many countries and a trend towards a shrinking civic space, particularly in the context of the COVID pandemic<sup>69</sup>. In 2020, The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) identified the first ever decline in the continent's governance average since the index was established in 2007. The Freedom Index also identifies a decline in freedom in 22 African states in 2020.

Almost all countries on the continent (48 out of 54) imposed measures to combat the spread of the virus that involved limiting freedom of association and assembly. Some countries have clearly used these exceptional measures for more political ends. This was the case in Guinea, which had been experiencing protests since the beginning of 2019 against constitutional reform allowing President Alpha Condé to seek a third term in the March 2020 elections. Measures restricting freedom of assembly were used to deter the protests anticipated<sup>70</sup>. According to Amnesty International, the crackdown on the protests resulted in the deaths of at least 50 people between October 2019 and July 2020<sup>71</sup>.

The challenge of the transitional phase created by the success of the new citizen movements is therefore twofold: on the one hand it involves defining a new political order and on the other, redefining the role of the citizen movements in crystallising new governance practices that go beyond the sole strategy of convening street

63. Quoted in Said Abbas, online interview, August 2021.

64. This phase covers the period from 2011, when *Y'en a marre* was founded in Senegal, to the transition sequence in the DRC, which occurred in 2019. The failures of unconstitutional changes occur respectively in Senegal in 2012, in Burkina Faso in 2013, and to some extent in the DRC in 2015. See "Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement", *op. cit.*

65. In Burkina Faso, a broad coalition of social forces mobilised around the Balai Citoyen led to the fall of President Compaoré in October 2014, before defeating a military coup in September 2015. A similar coalition enabled Sudanese youth to precipitate the fall of General Al Bashir in April 2019. For the specific case of Sudan see *IDEA* report, "Taking Stock of Regional Democratic Trends in Africa and the Middle East Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Special Brief*, January 2021, p. 8.

66. Alcinda Honwana, "Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa", *African Arguments*, 12 August 2013.

67. E. Gyimah-Boadi, "Democratic Retrenchment in West Africa: Characteristics, Causes and Solutions", *Kofi Annan Foundation*, December 2021.

68. Robert Mattes, "Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat'", *Afrobarometer Policy Paper* No. 54, February 2019.

69. *IDEA* Report, "Taking Stock of Regional Democratic Trends in Africa and the Middle East Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic", *op. cit.*

70. E. Gyimah-Boadi, "Le recul démocratique en Afrique de l'Ouest : caractéristiques, causes et solutions", *op. cit.*

71. Guinea, at least 50 killed with impunity in protests, *Amnesty International*, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020.

demonstrations and denouncing current institutional dysfunction.

## 2.2. Movements' and Activists' Profiles and Characteristics

Citizen movements such as *Le Balai citoyen*, *YAM*, *LUCHA* and *FILIMBI* are listed as associations in the same way as many other associations active in different countries on the continent. These movements differ from them, however, in terms of form, structure and modes of action, as well as in terms of content and objectives. It seems relevant to review the movements and identify what makes them different to the development, social and thematic associations that abound in different countries. When they emerged, it was thought that they would eventually merge into the mass of civil society organisations (CSOs) or NGOs but they have kept their specificities and a baseplate of points in common.

We are therefore able to distinguish between collectives and more individual trajectories. Citizen collectives are involved in concrete actions on the ground (structuring citizen expression, circular economy initiatives, initiatives aimed at impacting local governance and consolidating the anchoring of participatory democracy, etc.), online platforms dedicated to public action citizen monitoring, individual activists and cyber-activists and action on a wide range of issues, such as governance, gender equality and the environment.



### *Collectives*

Firstly, they define themselves as citizen collectives and not as associations. The “collective” refers to the inclusive and open dimension: they bring together citizens (young people in particular), as well as organisations of different kinds and are open to all socio-professional strata of the population. These movements do not identify with traditional civil society and are secular and non-partisan (members cannot belong to a party). They are therefore different to the numerous religious and political associations, as well as the trade unions. These movements have been able to maintain their political neutrality vis-à-vis the political parties.

Nevertheless, in an effort “to go beyond the day before”, some individuals have decided to create a new party, such as the *SENS* party (*Servir et non se servir*) in Burkina Faso. This was created in August 2020 by lawyer Guy Hervé Kam, former spokesperson for Balai

Citoyen<sup>72</sup>. His decision meant that he lost his membership of *Balai Citoyen*. This political commitment appears to be a way of putting the changes expected into practice and convincing people through example, starting with the municipalities, i.e. where they can make a difference. One distinguishing feature of these collectives is that they make room for artists. Artists have sometimes played a decisive role in the genesis of these movements, as well as in the way they attract young people and appeal to their preferred modes of communication.

Setting up small cells (the *Esprits* de YAM, the *Cibals* clubs at *Balai Citoyen*, the *Sinzili* at *FILIMBI*) of about ten people governed by a Charter and which act as sentinels spread over a certain area, is another feature of these movements<sup>73</sup>. They share, above all, a common vision that includes the transformation and change of society, the promotion of citizen participation and the desire to do politics differently. Finally, they advocate non-violence and have a common ideological ground inspired by the same African guiding light figures (Thomas Sankara, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, etc.), as a way of keeping themselves within a pan-African perspective.

In an effort to express themselves, mobilise, challenge and network, they have mixed words, imagery and slogans that are widely disseminated on social networks (the number of YAM subscribers grew from just 18,000 in November 2016 to 179,820 subscribers by November 2021).

Boureïma Ouédraogo has called them “*oral intellectuals*”, to distinguish them from “*the first generations of intellectuals who addressed a minority through the written word*”<sup>74</sup>. The communication offensive (slogans, tweets, etc.), the preferred means of mobilisation at critical moments, has gradually been transformed into the publication of press releases, as well as debates and interviews rebroadcast on social networks. *The Balai Citoyen* issued several press releases in November 2021 to denounce the Internet shutdowns and criticise President Roch Christian Kaboré’s security policy.

The *Y en a marre* movement, which was at the forefront of the fight against Abdoulaye Wade's third term in 2011-2012, launched a pre-emptive campaign in 2022 against a possible candidacy of President Macky Sall, under the theme “*Buko sax jéem*” (Don't even try). Since his re-election in 2019, there are signs that the president may be tempted to run again in 2024. This issue of a third term is likely to be a catalyst for tension, as was the case with the mass protests of March 2021 following the arrest on 3 March 2021 of MP Ousmane Sonko, an emblematic opposition figure<sup>75</sup>.

At the same time that these collectives emerged, Internet platforms were also set up to conduct public action monitoring. *ABLOGUI*<sup>76</sup>, for example, the association of Guinean bloggers set up in 2011, conducted citizen monitoring of the 2015 elections. Other citizen platforms for monitoring and evaluating government promises also monitor the degree to which a government fulfils its commitments throughout its mandate. In Guinea, the *Labidi* platform lists on its website the promises made by President Alpha Condé in different fields during his last two terms in office and assesses the degree to which each of them was met. In Burkina Faso, *Présimètre* carries out similar monitoring work to evaluate the actions of the head of state: a pie chart shows the progress of each commitment made by the government. Other citizen monitoring sites have had shorter lifespans, such as *Mackymètre.com*, created in January

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72. See Abdoulaye Diallo interview.

73. See “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, *op. cit.*

74. *Idem*, p. 55.

75. See interview with Ndongo Sylla.

76. See interview with Alpha Diallo.

2013 in Senegal, or *Talonmètre* in Benin and *Fatshimetric* in the DRC.

### **Other Civic-tech Initiatives<sup>77</sup>**

The AfricTivists<sup>78</sup>, “*the most influential youth network in French-speaking Africa, as a force of protest (public policy and governance)*”, created in 2015, provides an organisation where the continent's bloggers and web-activists defend and promote democratic values, human rights and good governance through digital means. Based in Dakar, the pan-African organisation relies on a network of volunteers in different countries. Active during the pandemic, the AfricTivists also participated in the setting up of a fact-checking consortium.

Alongside these collectives campaigning for democratic governance, there are also those with more individual trajectories, involving bloggers, artists and journalists

### **2.3. New Citizen Practices and Community Activism**

In the wake of the new citizen movements, local level grassroots political activism is growing. The collectives are involved in issues that directly affect the lives of grassroots communities, such as environmental sanitation and access to basic services. They are developing different initiatives to impact local governance and consolidate the anchoring of a participatory democracy, especially through involvement in voter turnout campaigns and encouraging women and young people to become active political actors. As Denise Safiatou Sow notes, “*The current struggle is also about the defence of democracy. Citizens’ rights are being violated (with obstacles to the freedom to demonstrate), and there has been a decline in democracy over the last 4 to 5 years. This democratic backsliding does not only affect us, but also the political opposition and all those who stand in the way of the government. Even the judiciary is no longer independent and is being used to serve the government<sup>79</sup>*”.



*Training of young citizen reporters (YAM)*

In 2018, *YAM* set up *TLC*, *Citizen TV*, a web TV, which defines itself as alternative media, with a pan-African vocation, designed by and for citizens. It advocates a

77. See: “Les civic tech en Afrique : citoyens et technologies pour dynamiser la démocratie”, Synthesis, Decembre 2018, Bénin – Kenya – Sénégal – Tunisie, *CFI développement média*.

78. Annual activity report, 2019-2020.

79. Interview with Denise Safiatou Sow, founding member of *Y en marre*, December 2021.



participatory approach in its citizen journalism, with citizens directly contributing to the editorial content by sending in their videos and reports on situations that directly impact on people's lives. Its JRC (Young Citizen Reporters) programme focuses on enabling young people to produce and publish audiovisual content or articles dealing with citizenship, the environment, governance and development<sup>80</sup>.

The channel provides an alternative to the dominance of the major public and private media companies. In the context of the elections, TLC devised a programme that sought to facilitate a framework for exchanging views between the candidates and the public.

The *Sunu gox*'s, "Our Locality" initiative is another emblematic YAM Collective project. It corresponds to a long-held aspiration of the citizen movements and its commitment to improving people's access to basic services, as well as to improve the integration of the Dakar city suburbs. The project is a continuation of citizens' initiatives undertaken by the movement to organise the "Esprits", who act as a liaison hub for the actors in charge of cleaning up the neighbourhoods, the grassroots organisations, authorities and inhabitants. In addition to promoting solidarity and raising residents' awareness about environmental issues, this two-year project aimed to strengthen citizenship in these areas neglected by the public authorities<sup>81</sup>.

In Burkina Faso, it is around the project "Alliance Jeunes et Parlementaires" (Youth and Parliamentarians Alliance) that *Le Balai Citoyen* is trying to address the issue of youth participation in electoral and political processes, by giving them the opportunity to acquire the knowledge necessary to exercise their citizenship. This two-year project, developed in partnership with the NGO Oxfam, sought to strengthen the influencing skills of more than 200 young participants<sup>82</sup>. The introduction of a "youth quota" on national electoral lists for the general elections and the recruitment of a pilot cohort of young parliamentary assistants at the National Assembly, were proposed as ways of improving youth representation within parliament. The impact of these pilot projects will have to be evaluated over time.

#### 2.4. Citizen Movements' Challenges and Perspectives

Translating their political grievances into programmatic content is seen as one of the major challenges facing the citizen movements. Some observers interpret the authoritarian restoration experienced in some countries as the result of these new actors of the citizen movements lacking a definition for an alternative governance model. The recurring power plays in several countries (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso) in a context of the relative fragility of democratic institutions has also become a new warning signal.

LUCHA activist, Micheline Mwindike, explains, "the fact of existing after these ten years of struggle, in a context hostile to our presence"<sup>83</sup> is one of the highlights of the decade, as well as a testimony to the success of the citizen movements. The reasons that contributed to the emergence of the citizen movements have not disappeared, such as the violence against civilians, rape and gender-based violence, insecurity and armed groups, in the case of Eastern Congo. The relationship between citizen movements and the authorities in the DRC has become relatively peaceful, but the risks for activists have not disappeared, especially with the approach of the electoral cycles. Moreover, some local warlords - who have benefitted from the war economy and the pillaging of resources in

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80. Interview with Denise Safiatou Sow, December 2021.

81. *Idem*.

82. Interview with Ousmane Lonkonade.

83. Webinar, Wathi-Grip, 27 April 2022

the east of the country - remain the main instigators of threats and violence against the activists who denounce social malpractice and injustice, as well as the illegal exploitation of resources<sup>84</sup> .

The gradual construction of a common foundation for movements on a continental scale with the creation of the [Afriki](#)<sup>85</sup> network, the network of activists from Africa and its diasporas, and the founding of the Université populaire de l'engagement citoyen (UPEC), also provide prospects for a renewal in proposals and practices.

The theme of the “democratic dividend” and the revival of municipalism advocated by citizen movement actors, constitute stimulating new fields of research.<sup>86</sup> The theme of open governance at the local level, i.e. the municipality as a space for a new type of politics (defended by the *SENS* movement in Burkina Faso), reflects the desire of some citizen movement actors to act as incubators for creating a new political class. The new associative dynamic of alliances of social forces without party membership could also constitute a response to the disaffection of young people with mainstream political organisations.<sup>87</sup> One of the ultimate challenges for the citizen movements is their ability to build an economic model based on autonomy and independence from external donors. It is a question of preserving their specificity while avoiding the pitfalls and bureaucratic turns taken by many civil society organisations.

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84. Floribert Anzulini, Wathi-Grip webinar, 27 April 2022.

85. Its objective is to federate the thinking and action of social movements in Africa and its diasporas around a common pan-African agenda. Website; A similar initiative exists on the English-speaking side, it is the platform YADA “young african defenders in action”. However, YADA's objectives are oriented towards the defence of human rights : is to connect and support young human rights defenders in Africa and its Diasporas for the improvement of the respect of human dignity in Africa.

86. See interview with Floribert Anzulini.

87. *Idem*.

### 3. Interview with Citizen Movement Collectives and Leading Figures

#### Interview with Gilles Yabi<sup>88</sup> (Wathi Citizen Think Tank)

##### *The Citizen Movements' Trajectory and Evolution*



It should be stressed that the trajectory and evolution of the citizen movements occurred at key political junctures, such as the points at which the mobilisations crystallised. This was particularly the case with those seeking to prevent presidents standing for another term of office, regardless of the Constitution. The difficulty for these different movements has always been how to choose an appropriate mode of action that aligns with the timing and receptivity of public opinion. How to adapt to the changing situation? Should the mobilisation continue or should the organisation be disbanded once the objective had been achieved? This question was highly relevant. One possibility was that another movement or organisation could emerge with a different objective. In the Senegalese context, activists were faced with these questions and different options. Once the transition phase was over, should they join a political movement or remain in a position of standby and vigilance as citizens? The difficulty then becomes one of maintaining the unity of the movements. In Burkina Faso, Guy-Hervé Kam, a member of the *Balai citoyen*, set up the political movement *Sens*<sup>89</sup> with other activists. This illustrates the importance of the political situation. The movement leaders are key elements in the future of the movements and much is at stake at the level at which they are operating. One of the keys to the success of the citizen movements involves their alliance with different actors. For these movements to thrive, the combination of different profiles has proved important: musicians and artists, intellectuals, journalists, etc., all contribute in their own way to producing this unique political programme. As soon as success was achieved, however, the movements received offers of support, which *de facto* encouraged them to organise themselves better, in order to meet the often restrictive requirements of certain donors. There is, therefore, a risk of a sort of “standardisation” of the organisation occurring on the model of conventional civil society bodies, which can create tension.

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88. Entretien réalisé en juillet 2021.

89. See interview with Abdoulaye Diallo.

*Urban/Rural Rift*

YAM's awareness-raising action for the registration of young people on the electoral roll, March 2022. Source YAM

Notwithstanding the citizen movements' mainly urban roots, there are still countries that have a significant proportion of the population in rural areas and it is important to emphasise that these movements also operate outside the urban centres. *"We cannot say that these movements represent only urban elites, many activities also take place in poor peri-urban areas. These actions are aimed at all young people. We should not forget the role of artists in citizen movements as a link to the working class"*.

### ***Recurrent Themes Conveyed by the Movements***

Citizen movements mobilise around highly political issues related to improving governance, especially at times when people are most receptive to mobilising messages and actions. The movements have demonstrated their ability to mobilise during political highpoints, but it remains unclear to what extent they are forces for real change or whether they can influence political practices.

The ruling class is, nevertheless, well aware

that it is under scrutiny and that it must take the youth into account. As regards the pan-Africanist theme adopted by the movements, the UPEC (*Université populaire de l'engagement citoyen*<sup>90</sup>) brings this vision about by linking up the different organisations on the continent. The knock-on effects in terms of governance and levers for change have yet to be evaluated. The complementarity between the citizen movements and their modes of action is useful. Some initiatives, such as the Lahidi platform in Guinea or the Présimètre in Burkina Faso, assess the extent to which the governments' electoral promises have been met. What, however, can be said about the follow-up and can they go further than a citizen's watch?

Different initiatives have been taken by young members of the citizen movements, particularly in the fields of the environment and sanitation. There are also projects in local governance, but these are less known and less reported by the media than the political events involving action by the citizen movements. In Senegal, *Y'en a marre* (YAM) has been criticised for the risk of its new activities being dependent on funding from NGOs and development cooperation actors. Its relative decrease in media visibility has been interpreted as a decline in its influence, but it is difficult for the Collective to be as visible as it is during more intense political highpoints.

90. The first edition of this meeting, held from 23 to 28 July 2018 in Dakar, laid the foundations for a pan-African network of citizen engagement.

Since traditional political opposition remains relatively weak, however, citizen movements are still the main source the leaders use for providing indications about what is going on.

The under-representation of women in the leadership of the citizen movements is a fact that cannot be ignored. The movements are, on the whole, dominated by young men, despite the fact that they define themselves as progressive movements. This may explain the tendency of women activists to carry out more individually oriented action (see the trajectory of the Guinean cyberactivists or that of Togolese activist, Farida Bemba Nabourema<sup>91</sup>).

According to Gilles Yabi, the critical mass of citizen actors is still insufficient to initiate real change in political systems and practices. Their strategies for struggle require more research and conceptual reflection. This means that the collectives must work, over time, to adapt their modes of action to national contexts and to bring innovative political actors onto the scene who can bring about this change

## Entretien avec Floribert Anzulini, coordonnateur du collectif FILIMBI<sup>92</sup>



The citizen movements are part of a new type of political trajectory, whose actors distance themselves from the conventional party system and traditional political forces. The first part of this trajectory can be defined as a period of social protest, in a transitional context, involving the struggle for change and leading up to the current phase involving structural transformation. The purpose of this book is

to fully highlight the features of this anchoring and transformation phase. What is FILIMBI doing in this new phase? How has the movement reorganised itself? How do its action strategies translate? What are the strongest themes in the current evolutionary phase?

### *Challenges of an Incomplete Transition*

The current phase of the movement's trajectory involves, first of all, a phase of critical introspection that examines some of the weaknesses identified, particularly with regard to the work involving the training of grassroots activists and raising their level of awareness. Floribert Anzulini argues, "*We didn't take enough time to develop our approach to training*" and that as the, "*Momentum of the struggle for ensuring respect of the Constitution and for alternating political power*" comes to an end, some of the people involved are seen to be lacking a "*sufficient ideological grounding*". These activists equate the expected societal "*change*" with "*change at the head of the state*". The risk contained within this perception is two-fold.

On the one hand, "*A sizable number of activists believe that the fight is over and once an autocrat has been removed from power, we now have to move on to another phase. Citizen movement activism*

91. See interview with Farida Nabourema.

92. Interview, 12 August 2021.

*has to end and we need to take part in what has been put in place. That's the first problem. Secondly, there is another category of people who are frustrated because they cannot see the change that had been hoped for. They have quickly identified a new monster to fight and this monster can always be found in the institutions and in the person who embodies power today".* This personification of the aims of the struggle creates an extreme simplification. It is the most reductionist vision of how to take the struggle forward, which focuses on a single individual and quick-fix solution, *"If this person is the problem, all we have to do is replace them"*.

This is a particularly sensitive time in the Collective's trajectory, due to the risk of the movement splitting over these two contradictions. Floribert Anzuluni thinks that the fight now involves doing everything possible to raise awareness and to provide ideological training in the medium and long term. The citizen movements failed to integrate this objective sufficiently during the first phase of their trajectory, *"because we were born during the Momentum where everyone was committed, determined and wanted to bring down an authoritarian regime, to take back their freedoms and improve their living conditions"*. It was easier to channel this initial momentum. Floribert Anzuluni points out, however, that it was afterwards that, *"We became more aware of the importance of this essential work, which goes beyond simply replacing an individual and involves changing mentalities and values"*.

The movement has an important process of citizen education to carry out, *"This involves helping activists understand that they have only won one lap on the journey to victory and that the real work of substance now has to begin"*, all the more so, since the current political environment allows citizen collectives to carry out their activities in greater peace than previously.

The general observation made by the FILIMBI facilitators, however, is that *"Those who have to carry out this awareness-raising work must themselves be made aware"*. This approach needs to be anchored in the way in which the trainers operate and amongst *"the young people who have already been active for several years"*.

### ***Organisation, Regional Anchoring and Action Strategies***

FILIMBI has set up a large network of activists who are accountable and kept up to speed on a continual basis, as well as supervised and monitored within the framework of its internal organisation. Its numbers vary between 500 and 800 people. There is a kind of pendular mobility among these activists, who come and go within the movement's grassroots cells. At the provincial level, the collective exists in thirteen of the country's twenty-six provinces. FILIMBI has on average around fifty activists trained and monitored in each city, who raise awareness and play a guiding role. The challenge, as already mentioned, is that these are the same people who need to be ideologically trained.

*"In strategic terms, we decided to focus on making people aware that change is not about changing one person. We realised that not everyone has a clear understanding of what a system is. The system is, above all, a set of values that have developed. This system is embodied in the whole of society in a general way and is expressed through anti-values like corruption"*.

Since 2019, FILIMBI has decided to focus on the issue of fighting corruption, because it is institutionalised, right down to the grassroots, and encroaches on the common good.

At a hands-on practical level, the collective is setting up training courses for activists responsible for raising awareness among the movement's grassroots. To this end,

partnerships have been set up with expert bodies in monitoring governance, the fight against corruption and the use of public funds.

This is the goal of the special partnership with the ODEP<sup>93</sup>, one of the most experienced organisations active in this field. ODEP trained some of FILIMBI's activists in Kinshasa, as part of a joint project in 2020 and 2021. The project focused on monitoring the expenditure of public funds allocated to the COVID pandemic prevention and control campaign. There had been several indications that this expenditure had been misappropriated.



*COVID pandemic awareness and prevention action in a Kinshasa market, March 2020. Source FILIMBI*

ODEP and FILIMBI set up a citizen's public expenditure observatory, targeting four pilot boroughs in Kinshasa. Teams of 10 or 20 people, previously trained by ODEP, were deployed in each borough to carry out this citizen observation work. ODEP specialises in technical procedures and does not have a citizen monitoring mechanism. The partnership with FILIMBI is therefore based on their complementarity. The monitoring involved the allocation of funds granted to the boroughs for the purchase of prevention kits and the effective deployment of pandemic control mechanisms. The citizen observers were specifically tasked with verifying the receipt of these kits, to whom they had been given, etc.

A similar citizen monitoring process was created to assess the allocation of funds to the Kinshasa general hospital, "Mama Yemo". The team attached to the hospital's management had to verify the use of funds allocated for tackling the pandemic. Out of a total amount of 800,000 US dollars allocated, it was found that 300,000 never arrived. This involvement of citizens in active monitoring means that the monitoring of certain social issues is no longer left in the exclusive hands of experts. This is in line with a desire to "de-elitimize" social issues, a goal shared by all citizen movements. FILIMBI's repertoire of activities covers a wide range of other areas, including advocacy work, sit-ins, public demonstrations, in connection with the protection of

93. [Observatory of public expenditure](#) in the DRC.

citizens' or consumers' rights, solidarity with people affected by the violence of armed groups in the east of the country and electoral reform.

### ***FILIMBI's Legal Status***

FILIMBI is a de facto association. For the members of the Collective the absence of a formal legal status initially corresponded to the new citizen movements' concept. The aim was to “mobilise citizens” in general and not just a group of people, “*We had previously rejected any formal structures because we felt that if we adopted them, we would fall into the same trap as traditional organisations, which tend to remain inward-looking. They forget that their role is to serve citizens and become small, specialised fundraising administrative units. We said we wanted to focus on the citizens, as the Constitution allows, and we didn't need to formalise an organisation to do that*”.

The Collective originally had what it calls an unofficial HQ in the city of Kinshasa. It now has an official headquarters where four people work on a permanent basis. FILIMBI organises its training and meetings there. “*This has become a necessity. We now feel the need for at least a minimum of organisation. The somewhat naïve dream that citizen dynamics had at the beginning, which is to say that it is enough to be committed and determined to achieve one's objectives, is disappearing. We are now aware that if we want to carry out medium- and long-term action, it is important for us to have a minimum of organisation for developing plans and not just reacting to situations*”.

The partnership with ODEP has enabled FILIMBI to access certain institutional funding, insofar as ODEP is an organised and legally constituted entity. FILIMBI has adapted its initial model by creating a parallel structure whose exclusive mission is to take charge of the movement's administration and fund raising. This corresponds to the need for a minimum of structure. A clear distinction is made between the *Movement*, which remains part of the grass roots dynamics and the new technical support structure, constituted in the form of an association, which will be a member of the movement, but whose mission will be to exclusively manage the mobilisation of resources and the entire administrative side of FILIMBI's activities. The project developed with the ODEP allows FILIMBI to operate with a project coordinator, a person in charge of administration and equivalent roles for finance and communication.

### ***New Strategic Alliances***

In 2021, FILIMBI joined the network “Congo is not for sale” or the CNPAV<sup>94</sup>, a platform of local organisations and associations partnered with international organisations active in good governance issues in the mining and electricity sectors. Mining and energy access are key issues in the DRC. The mining sector accounts for more than 80% of the country's export earnings. Access to energy is a prerequisite not only for the development of local economic activities but also for the well-being of the population overall.

The DRC has been described as a “*geological scandal*”, given the importance and diversity of its mineral resources (copper, cobalt, coltan, gold, diamonds), including strategic minerals essential for the energy transition in industrialised countries. The people of

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94. [Congo is not for sale](#).



the DRC<sup>95</sup>, however, are from benefitting from these resources. The ongoing conflict in the east of the country is also fuelled by an illegal economy of resource predation, the local, regional and international ramifications of which have been documented<sup>96</sup>. The CNPAV's work focuses on denouncing and fighting against the plundering of resources and corrupt practices, with a view to promoting transparency and good governance in the mining sector. A dozen local associations responsible for monitoring mining activities in Katanga, Kivu and Ituri ensure, within the framework of this platform, the daily monitoring of the mining and electricity sector to assess compliance with the principles of good governance and due diligence.

### ***Incubators for Alternatives***

The question of how the citizen movements formulate and propose real alternatives was one of the major issues at the December 2020 UPEC meeting in Dakar<sup>97</sup>. Floribert Anzuluni clearly points out that, *“The question is whether we should reposition ourselves in the direction of a partisan political reengagement? We can definitely work on alternative proposals, but at some point, in a democratic system, the implementation of proposals requires the taking of power, political power, strictly speaking”*.

The citizen movements agree on the need to develop their capacity for proposing real alternatives that address governance deficits on the continent. Ensuring their implementation, once these proposals are formulated, is the most difficult issue.

Some activists have argued that in addition to incorporating a phase for proposals, the citizen movements should also have a partisan political wing.

Floribert Anzuluni believes that it is indeed appropriate for the movements to become sources from which proposals can be launched because they have the in-built expertise and values but that, *“The implementation tool, i.e. the taking and exercise of political power, should be clearly differentiated from the actual citizen dynamics and obviously remain non-partisan”*. One of the ideas retained in connection with this option, would be to develop cells within the citizen movements, whose goal would be to prepare citizens politically, *“This is the option that we have clearly been thinking about at the level of FILIMBI since 2019. Setting up this type of cell within the movement, with the aim of preparing future political actors, would enable us to equip them with the civic values and expertise to perform in the public and political sphere. These actors will be those most capable of conveying and relaying the proposals resulting from action taken by citizens”*.

The candidacy of Fadel Barro<sup>98</sup> for the mayor's office in Kaolack, during the Senegalese municipal elections of January 2022, was followed closely and supported by other citizen movement activists, as Floribert Anzuluni explained, *“Fadel's campaign is being organised by several movements and movement leaders. That's to say, Fadel's unofficial team is made*

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95. “La RDC perd près de 100 milliards USD chaque année dans la fraude manière”, *Zoom-eco.net*, 31 August 2020.

96. “Les ressources minières : richesse ou malédiction ? Le cas de la République démocratique du Congo”, Commission Justice et Paix, 2012.

97. “Les activistes dénoncent les autocrates”, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 December 2020.

98. A founding member and former coordinator of Y'en a marre, Fadel Barro ran unsuccessfully for the city of Kaolack (300,000 inhabitants, located in the centre of the country) in the January 2022 municipal elections. The programme of his coalition “Jammi Gox Yi” (peace of the territories, in Wolof) focuses on the idea of a reappropriation of governance at the local level by citizens, within the framework of a participatory municipal democracy, to solve the needs of the population at the grassroots, around the concept of dignity. See [“Jammi gox yi”](#).

*up of Burkinabes and Congolese, etc. We are working with him on future strategies and helping him to mobilise resources in a citizen-orientated way and we may even contribute to what he is implementing”<sup>99</sup>.*

As the institutional level closest to the daily lives of citizens, the municipality seems to be becoming a space of major interest and investment for new civic dynamics, where the dream is to develop a political laboratory approach, experimenting with new ideas and new governance practices:

*“Models like the one Fadel is trying to set up are a kind of prototype for us for testing at a local level what could become the best formula for local governance”.* Another reference in the same vein is the one proposed in Burkina by activists from *Balai citoyen*, who left the latter to set up the SENS movement<sup>100</sup>. This is a clearly political project, based on Sankarist ideals and aims to make a break with the practices of mainstream political parties<sup>101</sup>. It is complementary to the citizen movements without being dependent on them.

The SENS movement presented a list for the November 2020 general elections but did not win any seats. This electoral exercise, however, enabled it to make its project known to the Burkinabe people<sup>102</sup>. The reflections underway within the citizen dynamics share affinities with the political project that the SENS movement is currently developing.

*“The SENS project is a prototype that we are following closely. Although local elections have not been organised in the DRC since the return to the multiparty system in 2006, the experiences in the different countries that are most advanced on this issue provide references for reflection on what could be an ideal type of local governance and incubators for new practices and places for training new political actor-citizens”.*

### **The Position of Women in FILIMBI**

It is a fact that the number of female figures in the leadership of FILIMBI is relatively low. It can be explained by two factors, one economic and the other, socio-cultural. The citizen movements largely emerged in a specific context, characterised by a climate of extreme hostility during the struggles against an authoritarian regime that was trying to maintain power illegally. The context was one of recurrent clashes, arrests and very harsh repression. For Floribert Anzuluni, *“This is an element that made the commitment and involvement of women difficult from the outset. We have had some very committed women, mostly in the interior of the country. One of our most committed activists suffered the distress of being arrested and very quickly her situation as a woman, mother and wife forced her to leave the movement. Another activist, a single mother, also gave up her activism because of her family situation”.* Social situation, status and cultural environment clearly made it difficult for women to be active during this period. Repression as experienced at the time the citizen movements were set up no longer exists, but there are still constraints on women. Despite FILIMBI's efforts to identify the profiles of women who can participate in this new stage of struggle and

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99. The interview with Floribert Anzuluni took place before the Senegalese elections. The support mentioned from the citizens' movements relates to the preparatory period of the electoral campaign.

100. See interview with Abdoulaye Diallo.

101. Le Mouvement SENS dévoile ses “grands chantiers”, *Burkina24.com*, 2 November.

102. “Législatives de novembre 2020 : En dépit du score réalisé, le Mouvement ‘SENS’ place sa confiance aux graines semées”, *Le faso.net*, 3 December 2020.

activism, the citizen movements' image is still to some extent associated with the risk of violence and repression of protesters.

### ***Pan-African Momentum***

The goal of the citizen movements is to set up a pan-African political network with a minimum set of values, principles and rules that all political citizens' activities emerging at local level and in different countries should convey. In other words, this involves defining a pan-African vision that will be the basis on which the different national visions will unfold and develop, “*During the second UPEC meeting in Dakar in December 2020, the idea of a training module for collectives was adopted to accompany this work for conceptually structuring and enhancing common methodologies for peaceful democratic struggle*”. This project is led by leading academics from the continent who are open to the citizen movements' approach, in cooperation with think-tanks and training partners, such as [Thinking Africa](#). The inception of the networking of citizens' collectives has also made it possible to build bridges between African citizen movements and to involve collectives from linguistic areas other than French-speaking ones. As Floribert Anzuluni points out, “*This was one of the initial weaknesses. But there are now tools to overcome language barriers and initiate discussions with English-speaking groups, including organisations in South Africa, Ghana and Kenya.*”

### **The African Union (AU) and Citizen Movements**

Although the African Union has a [Youth Charter](#) that calls for youth participation mechanisms to be created at all levels of decision-making and governance, as well as a Youth Envoy position, the African Union and its bodies still seem to be perceived by movement activists as distant and inaccessible entities.

*“Although we consider the AU to be an essential interlocutor for citizen-led activities and the democratic perspectives we defend, we believe that the AU does not meet the main objectives for which it was created. If the AU respected its Charter and its operating rules, I think we would not have the same reaction to the AU. We consider it as an interlocutor, but I have the impression that it is more the AU that has never considered us as potential interlocutors. I personally experienced this during my period of exile<sup>103</sup>, during which we made several requests to meet the AU representative in Brussels, as well as representatives from the sub-regional bodies, but we never got any positive response, apparently because they considered us not to be legal interlocutors”.* Whilst the FILIMBI coordinator sees the AU actors as interlocutors with whom one should have dialogue, and on whom one should put pressure, if necessary, for the sake of citizen advocacy, the general feeling amongst the activists is that they are perceived “*as actors on the fringes of society, with whom one should not have any dialogue*”.

### ***Citizen Movements and National Youth Councils***

Long before the African Youth Charter recommendations, many countries had a consultation body and the equivalent for youth associations and movements, whose prerogatives are part of national youth policies. The DRC has had a National Youth Council since 1999. In theory, this type of body can develop synergies with citizen

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103. The founding members of FILIMBI had to go into exile to avoid prosecution by the Congolese authorities, who accused them of terrorism. See “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, Claire Kupper, Michel Luntumbue, *et al*, GRIP, 2017.

movements on actions or themes related to the civic participation of young people. Floribert Anzuluni argues, “Once again, in most countries, these bodies are highly politicised. The governments in place, unfortunately, appoint appendages of their own political apparatus, young people who are part of their own political movements and therefore subject to certain control”. This is the case in different countries and it is the case today in the DRC”. Many councils are completely tied to the government in power and are not natural interlocutors for the citizen movements, as they are not independent. Floribert Anzuluni considers, however, that, “If the authorities decided to make this body independent and asked all the independent civil society movements to take part in a reflection process to rethink this body and make it genuinely independent, we would obviously take part in it”.

### ***The Movement’s Impact***

Anzuluni acknowledges that, “Social networks have played a decisive role in the impact of our struggles...and have completely changed the situation by breaking the monopoly of information control by the state and large private media”. After the FILIMBI coordinator and his companions’ exile came to an end, however, the Collective opted for a return to outreach work. This awareness-raising is complementary to the use of social networks. “These are the two main tools that have made different actions successful. Our outreach capability and use of social networks make this different to many existing situations”. These two components are the keys to success. Awareness-raising activities can be carried out on social networks, which remain a powerful tool. Most policy decisions are still locally influenced by what happens on social networks. There is also, nonetheless, real action taken on the ground with marches and sit-ins, etc. In addition to the training and capacity building tool, “We draw our legitimacy from this presence on the ground, which allows us to be as close as possible to the concerns of our fellow citizens and to provide a relay for them”.

### **Entretien avec Fred Bauma<sup>104</sup>**

Looking back at the new phase of the citizen movements, we can see that they have moved from a position of protest and support for transition, to one of proposals for comprehensive societal change. How are the movements reviving their practices? What are the organisational considerations in the new phase? What development has been observed in how the citizen movements position themselves politically and put down roots in urban and rural areas?

### ***Lucha’s Evolution and Post-transition Strategies for Struggle***



*“The structure of the movement has undergone many changes over time. The line guiding us since the beginning is that of horizontality in the leadership of the movement. We even sought absolute horizontality; then there was the creation of the Cells and the movement’s Charter<sup>105</sup>. This evolution took place in response to the challenges we faced and compelled us to decide on which way we*

104. Entretien, août 2021.

105. “Une jeunesse africaine en quête de changement”, Claire Kupper, Michel Luntumbue, *et al.*, GRIP, 2017.

*should organise ourselves. We have had many internal debates, particularly with regard to the definition of our trajectory and relationship to politics. We try to be careful in the way we move ahead*<sup>106</sup>.

In December 2018 a controversial electoral process took place in the DRC, which resulted in Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), the country's oldest opposition party<sup>107</sup>, winning office. According to the constitutional deadline these elections were initially scheduled for 2016 but were postponed following delaying tactics by the outgoing President Joseph Kabila, who had already served two consecutive statutory terms since his election in the 2006 multiparty ballot. His attempts at constitutional change were confronted with mass mobilisations in January 2015, as well as the fragmentation of the outgoing presidential majority<sup>108</sup>.



*Photo LUCHA*

The relatively peaceful transfer of power in January 2019 created some mixed feelings among the citizen movements. *“The 2018 election was a big shock that we didn’t expect. For many citizen movement members, especially those that have been under the spotlight for the past five years, we are not yet out of the transition. Some of us are resentful of what we would have liked the transition to be. We feel that we have not reaped the fruit of what we sought. People expected these transitions to bear fruit but this did not happen because the transition did not take place as we wanted it to in Congo or because our expectations were too high. The way the transitions have gone is not satisfactory to many people and this applies equally to the DRC, Senegal and Burkina Faso*<sup>109</sup>.

106. Fred Bauma, interview conducted in August 2021.

107. Report on the 2018 Harmonised Presidential, Parliamentary and Provincial Elections, Democratic Republic of Congo, Electoral Expert Mission, *Carter Center*.

108. See: La République démocratique du Congo vit-elle un scénario à la burkinabe ? Agathe Plauchut and Michel Luntumbue, *GRIP*, January 2015.

109. Fred Bauma, interview, August 2021.

### *Debate on New Perspectives*

The citizen movements have experienced a certain demoralisation, which has fuelled a debate amongst activists about the role the movements should play. The relationship between the citizen movements and politics is an important area of this debate. According to Fred Bauma, there has been a shift in the, “*way citizen movements were defined and perceived at the beginning and the way they ended up operating afterwards*”<sup>110</sup>. When the citizen movements emerged, they were characterised by their critical stance towards both mainstream civil society and political society. The latter were, at the time, criticised for their relationship to power and for “*seeking power to maintain it*”. The citizen movements were described as “*civil society social movements*”. Fred Bauma points out that over time, “*We came to behave according to the box we had been put in and forgot about the criticisms we had made of civil society at the beginning. This criticism gave us a lot of freedom to act beyond the sphere of civil society*”.

The citizen movements initially defined themselves as “*politicised social groups*”, in the sense of having a higher political consciousness.<sup>111</sup> By choosing, at specific times, to make ad hoc strategic alliances with traditional political actors, the citizen movements have sometimes blurred the boundaries that distinguished them from conventional civil society actors. In the period leading up to and following the postponement of the 2016 elections in the DRC, several instances of dialogue and meetings took place between representatives of the citizen movements, civil society and members of the Congolese political opposition, in an effort to define a joint strategy against the blocking of the electoral process<sup>112</sup>.

These alliances took place in specific circumstances that justified strategic alliances but did, according to a section of public opinion and activists, run the risk of diluting the citizen movements’ specificity, “*When we start behaving like civil society actors, we limit the tools for action and pressure that distinguish us from those we consider to be civil society. It has therefore often been difficult to explain to our activists the scope and merits of this kind of dialogue with actors whom the citizen movements do not usually trust*”<sup>113</sup>. In the face of certain issues of national importance, however, this dialogue has proved to be indispensable.

With a view to holding a peaceful election in 2023, the citizen movements have maintained this dialogue about electoral reform and the Independent National Electoral Commission, CENI<sup>114</sup>. This dialogue is still, nonetheless, affected by the entrenched distinctions and divisions between the citizen movements, civil society, the political class, trade unions and religious denominations. Rapprochement between them will allow, at most, the possibility of creating temporary strategic alliances but will provide less of an opportunity for changing the political culture in the immediate future.

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110. Fred Bauma, interview, August 2021.

111. *Afrikarabia*, “RDC : une note de l'ANR sur la réunion de Gorée fait polémique”, 30 December 2015.

112. *Afrikarabia*, “RDC : une note de l'ANR sur la réunion de Gorée fait polémique”, 30 December 2015 ; Pierre Collet, “De Genval au dialogue: dynamiques et crispations au sein de l'opposition en RDC”, *GRIP*, 22 September 2016; *Le Monde Afrique*, “RDC: à Paris, la société civile agrège ses forces pour obtenir le départ de Kabila”, 18 August 2017; *Le Temps*, “La politique congolaise se décide à Genève”, 9 November 2018.

113. Interview conducted in August 2021.

114. *MediaCongo.net*, “Le CLC, la Lucha, Filimbi et Les Congolais Debout proposent un calendrier d'évaluation et de réforme de la Ceni”, 25 June 2026.

### ***Revival and Bringing New Generations of Activists On Board***

At the time the citizen movements emerged, there was no indication that they would survive in either the DRC, Burkina Faso or Senegal. They have, nonetheless, passed the test of time and are still putting forward initiatives that seek to transform governance and political practices. There is continued support among young people for the citizen movements in the DRC. Many want to join existing collectives such as *LUCHA* or create similar citizen movements. *“It is difficult to calculate how many people have joined, but when I am in Goma, I find myself in meetings where more than half of the people are new. This is the case in all sections”*.

When *LUCHA* was set up, it decided to mobilise around the issue of youth unemployment, defending rights in general, and people’s access to basic needs, such as water and electricity. The citizen movements’ overall aim is to foster a form of governance that guarantees the entire population access to the highest standards of wellbeing. The new bodies emerging follow the same thematic continuity. The creation of these new collectives, however, also involves a risk of going off-track. Certain organisations created on the same model want to be active within the traditional political domain. Some of the associations that existed previously and adopted the citizen movements’ label out of opportunism, without sharing their objectives or motives, could possibly undermine this new type of political commitment.

Apart from the key mobilisation highpoints, Bauma points out that life in the citizen movements is by and large, routine. This requires activists to maintain contact with the people, so they can be mobilised at the right time. *“There is a delay between the times of mobilisation, during which the movements have to reinvent themselves and the times when they have to remain connected to their base. In Senegal, Y’en a marre (YAM) has set up initiatives that fall within the scope of NGO activities, to accompany and support people in projects on the ground. YAM is registered as a civil society association<sup>115</sup>, which allows it to receive, under certain conditions, funding from foundations and NGOs to carry out projects that are at the heart of its struggle and which it decides itself. To counterbalance the dominant state and private sector media, YAM has created an online television station, which aims to be citizen-based and participatory<sup>116</sup>. The Senegalese situation is quite distinct and differs from the situation of organisations in other countries. It does, nonetheless, respond to the same wish to reinvent itself. This choice has not been easy and has been the source of much pressure and criticism targeting the collective and its international partners<sup>117</sup>”*.

The divisions among civil society created by the 2018 elections in the DRC did not spare the citizen movements. This was due to the conditions in which the electoral process was conducted. Fred Bauma describes this election as, *“an optical illusion that consisted in selling change, without bringing change and by using methods to impose an opponent that could have allowed anyone else to be imposed”*. The citizen movements were bewildered and did not know what to do or whether they should believe that the change was genuine. At the level of *LUCHA*, however, the movement adopted a position of distrust towards the new president from the outset and part of the movement remained on the alert. In many sections, activists reorganised themselves by repositioning themselves more on the issue of local governance. Indeed, in the period following the inauguration of the new president, the situation in the Congolese provinces was

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115. See the interview with Denise Sow.

116. LTC, a citizen's web TV, an alternative media with a pan-African vocation, designed and run by citizens.

117. See interview with Gilles Yabi.

marked by institutional instability and where provincial assemblies and governors were confronted with motions of no confidence on the grounds of mismanagement<sup>118</sup>.

Similarly, the context of the COVID pandemic and its restricted freedoms, as well as the onset of the economic recession that followed, were catalysts for a new mobilisation of citizen movements on the ground. Activists were heavily involved in awareness-raising campaigns and the distribution of preventive health kits. The position of the citizen movements, overall, is that the country is not yet out of its transition and it is therefore a question of maintaining pressure on political actors by keeping essential issues on the agenda, such as the fight against corruption, the issue of insecurity and violence in the east of the country, institutional reform prior to the next electoral cycle and governance in the management of natural resources and the environment, etc.

Following the example of the West African citizens' collectives (Guinea and Burkina Faso, in particular), *LUCHA* has also set up a citizens' barometer, the [Fatshimetric](#), to critically monitor the policies of President Félix Tshisekedi and the implementation of his campaign promises. Through this newsletter, *LUCHA* assesses the government's actions in the economic, social, political and security fields, grouped under the government's 15-point programme, which is itself inspired by the president's electoral campaign programme.

### ***The Rural Areas' Awakening***

*LUCHA* activists are aware that profound political and cultural change cannot be limited to mobilisation in urban areas. There is therefore a desire to mobilise in rural areas, but this is still limited by the resources and links available in certain areas of the country. The way in which people organise themselves and the interests around which they mobilise in rural areas may also differ from those in urban areas. It is possible that a one-off event can lead to strong mobilisation in rural areas, but without the commitment of the local communities concerned, the effect is limited. There is, however, a strong capacity for mobilisation in the peri-urban and rural areas of the regions most affected by insecurity in eastern DRC. This is the case in the town of Beni, where “*mobilisation very quickly went beyond the urban environment to the rural area because the problem around which people mobilise, namely insecurity and the violence of armed groups targeting civilians, is felt more strongly in rural areas than in towns*”. *LUCHA*'s sections based in the Oïcha and Kasindi communities in North Kivu, which are amongst the most affected localities in the region, are particularly active in denouncing the persistent killings in the area<sup>119</sup>.

### ***Social Networks and Dangers of a Digital Divide***

Communication through social networks is one of the generational markers of the citizen movements. Although digital technology has made it possible to circumvent the state monopoly of information and that of dominant private media, there is a risk of a real digital divide developing between urban and rural areas. *LUCHA* activists

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118 *Politico.cd*, “Motions de censure contre les exécutifs provinciaux : le ministre de l'Intérieur instruit les vice-gouverneurs à expédier les affaires courantes”, 4 July 2020.

119. The region has been plagued since 2014 by machete and bullet killings of civilians, attributed to the Ugandan rebel Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) refugees. According to civil society estimates, at least 3,000 civilians have been killed in various attacks over the past eight years.



have taken into account the issue of unequal access to digital communication. Communicating through social networks is mainly for the movement's internal and external use. *LUCHA*, however, makes extensive use of the WhatsApp network, so that people who have only intermittent internet connection access are not too left out. The use of digital media, however, is not the only mode of communication used. Press statements and releases via press briefings communicated by traditional media or action on the ground and sit-ins are still widely used modes of communication. Coverage of *LUCHA*'s statements and press releases by traditional media, for example, amplifies their impact on public opinion and enables the movement to broaden its reach.

### ***Change from Below?***

Despite their initial critical position towards the traditional political system, actors from the citizen movements have got involved in the electoral process in Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso and Senegal, with the idea of winning new ground during the local and general elections<sup>120</sup>. This is the path followed by both Fadel Barro<sup>121</sup> and former members of *Balai citoyen*, who formed the *SENS* movement<sup>122</sup>.

A reflection process is currently being undertaken within the citizen movements in the DRC on the redefinition of the relationship with politics at a local level. No active member of *LUCHA* has run in previous elections. Some figures from the citizen movements have been approached by the political parties and certain members of the citizen movements decided to support independent candidates in these elections. A few individuals have taken the step of entering Parliament, but these people have lost their activist status.

An instinctive distrust still effectively exists within the social movements and citizen collectives, which tends to perpetuate a strict separation between civil society and the political sphere, *“It's typical of this category to say: we are either civil society or political society, we can't be both at the same time. In a way, it's a precautionary measure for the moment, because we don't want to find ourselves under the influence of our former activists who have decided to go into politics. We want to keep our critical role”*.

The idea of supporting independent and innovative lists to try to win cities is shared by many activists. According to Fred Bauma, however, this cannot be an isolated project because, *“the governance of cities cannot be isolated from the rest of the province or the country”*. Winning over a city presupposes a strategy of alliances and developing a favourable balance of power relations at different levels: local, provincial and national. Under the Congolese constitution, the provinces and other decentralised entities theoretically have a high degree of autonomy, with the right to withhold 40% of the national revenue devolved to them<sup>123</sup>. Since the adoption of the Constitution in 2006, however, this 40% retrocession has never been effective, with most provinces only receiving retrocession of about 10% of these revenues from the central state. This results in an asymmetry of power between the local and provincial levels, and between the latter and the central power level.

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120. Between 2018 and 2022.

121. Jammi Gox Yi, in the municipal elections in January, and in the general elections.

122. See interview with Abdoulaye Diallo.

123. “RDC : que perçoivent les provinces au titre de la rétrocession ? » *RFI*, 2 September 2020.

The political and financial viability of the new local authorities that would come from the citizen movement could only be guaranteed by a reversal of the relationship between the town halls and the provinces, on the one hand, and the central state and the decentralised entities, on the other. The effective retrocession of resources would allow the latter to carry out their own policies. *“Winning a single council would not, however, be enough to reverse the asymmetrical relationship between the dominant political majority and the new independent actors. Winning at least three major cities, however, can provide the necessary political profile to resist the province, which becomes another objective. A lot can change”*.

### ***Pan-Africanism***

*LUCHA* is one of the founders of the AFRIKKI platform, created in December 2016 by the main French-speaking citizen collectives (YAM, *Balai citoyen*, FILIMBI, etc). This network aims to connect the African citizen movements and diaspora, in an effort to promote the exchange of experiences and strengthen personal ties between activists on a pan-African basis. *“Breaking down the language barrier is one perspective, as well as creating links with English and Portuguese speaking collectives, by providing a space to talk about goals involving ideals and new forms of political struggles, within a framework designed by the citizen movements, according to our own agenda and what we want to address and how we can move forward”*. AFRIKKI helps channel solidarity between citizen movements and also provides a safe space for activists who have been threatened, by putting pressure on governments and sub-regional organisations through political advocacy. During the second UPEC forum in Dakar in December 2020, the network managed to help an activist who was under threat in Côte d'Ivoire, escape to Senegal.

## Interview with Alpha Diallo<sup>124</sup>, President of the ABLOGUI Executive Board

The ABLOGUI (Association of Guinean Bloggers) was set up in 2011 by young Guinean bloggers and activists with the aim of using digital technology to promote democracy and “good governance”. Due to difficulties in accessing the internet and the limited number of bloggers in the country, the association only became fully operational in 2015, two years after the introduction of 3G, the third generation of mobile telephony<sup>125</sup>.



The first large-scale initiative set up by the collective is the #Guinea vote project. This is a digital citizen's platform for election monitoring, created for the 2015 presidential elections. The initiative was due to be repeated during the 2020 elections. This participatory platform for geolocating events during elections allows each citizen to report on what is happening before, during and after the election period, via e-mail, SMS, Twitter or the Web. “*The Guinea vote*” project involved nearly

450 young people in 2015.

*“We wanted to get involved in election observation because as young Guineans, we sought to make a contribution. We had noticed that all previous elections had been monitored by foreign observers, whose observation reports almost always came to the same conclusion and would state that despite some irregularities, the elections had generally gone well. The logic at the heart of Guinea Vote was to involve young people, who are too often the first victims of violent electoral cycles. In a country like Guinea, electoral debates have frequently veered into communal (“ethnic”) considerations that create problems. We have therefore tried to direct the debates towards concerns that are of interest to young people. We set up a comparison programme for the different candidates, which we followed on their election tours, and this ensured that their proposals were subject to debate”.*

The #Guinea vote experience was largely influenced by the Senegalese electoral monitoring citizen initiative, #Sunu2012, set up by bloggers and civil society for promoting transparency in the Senegalese 2012 presidential election<sup>126</sup>. In the early days of #Guinea vote, Guinean activists received decisive technical support from Senegalese activists, including Cheikh Fall, leader of *Africtivists*<sup>127</sup>, who travelled to Guinea to help set up the Guinean platform. In addition to the initial lack of resources and technical capacity, the project had to overcome a lot of pressure in a country where repression is harsh and sometimes violent. “*The fact that we had a system that enabled us to systematically post polling station reports online on social networks was not to the liking of some political decision-makers, who wanted to ban us from doing so, but this was not possible, because this system could not be controlled from the outside”*

124. Journalist blogger, interview conducted in September 2021.

125. It provides a high-speed Internet connection, and allows the viewing of videos and even television programmes, as well as video telephony.

126. This election is marked by the challenge to the candidacy of the outgoing president Abdoulaye Wade (2000-2012), deemed unconstitutional by part of the civil and political opposition.

127. Pan-African platform of bloggers and web-activists for the promotion and defence of democratic values, human rights and good governance through digital media.



This first exercise finally went off without a hitch. Despite the customary challenges from the defeated candidates, the re-election of President Alpha Condé (2010-2021) was confirmed. After an internal reflection on this first initiative, the collective decided not to wait for the end of the five-year term to repeat the same exercise. The idea of migrating to a platform for monitoring and evaluating the president-elect's promises subsequently emerged. This platform is called “*Labidi*”, which means “promise” in Sousou and Malinké, two of the three most widely spoken

languages in Guinea and which have the status of national languages (the third being Fulani). Although *Labidi* is an extension of #Guinea vote, the new platform aims to provide citizens with an objective tool to monitor the degree to which promises on which the President of the Republic was elected, have been met.

### ***Member Profiles and Modes of Organisation***

ABLOGUI has a core group of about 50 members in the country and diaspora at large. The association also has around 200 young “*supporters*” throughout Guinea. These are not bloggers or core activists but members of the observers’ network who have followed ABLOGUI's training on digital tools and who share the association's vision and approach. During the 2015 elections, the collective deployed nearly 450 young observers in the framework of #Guinea vote. During the 2020 elections, around 200 young people were also deployed in the country. These ABLOGUI network supporters are involved in their respective communities as ambassadors. They can therefore participate in the information and data feedback system set up by ABLOGUI. Their profiles vary. Some are unemployed, whilst others are graduates or working. Others are students based in Conakry (the capital), but also in the main administrative centres located in semi-urban, almost rural areas. “*Due to Internet access problems and because our whole network communicates via the Internet, we don't have many members in rural areas. Internet access difficulties in some rural areas therefore limits the way sections of the population in these areas can be mobilised*”.

In addition to #Guinée vote and *Labidi*, ABLOGUI also provides support to the projects of other young people and its members on a variety of subjects. Raising sexual and reproductive health awareness among young people is at the heart of the “#Generation that Dares” platform project, which brings together around one hundred young ambassadors active in their communities and who have received training in digital tools to make their community work more effective. The environmental theme was the subject of a unique and provocative #*selfdedechets* campaign, set up in Conakry by blogger Fatoumata Cherif, a member of ABLOGUI, which aimed to raise awareness among citizens about the impact of urban pollution caused by unauthorised dumping. The Guinean activist, whose example has been followed in other African cities, was the first to use the self-portrait as a citizen tool to denounce the uncontrolled proliferation of waste in her city<sup>128</sup>. The blogger, Dieretou

128. “En Afrique, le selfie s'attaque aux tas d'ordures”, *Libération*, 8 February 2017.

Diallo, one of ABLOGUI's female board of directors, created the “#GuineenneDu21esiecle” collective, which focused on the fight against gender-based violence, rape and female circumcision<sup>129</sup>. Young women account for around 30% of ABLOGUI's membership, according to Alpha Diallo.

### ***The Generation Gap***

The generation gap is borne out at a variety of different levels and domains in Guinea and creates an obstacle to cooperation between young people and political actors. When the #Guinea vote platform was set up during the 2015 elections, the pressure experienced by ABLOGUI actors stemmed from the generation gap between young people and political decision-makers on the one hand, but also between young people and mainstream civil society actors, on the other. All the civil society organisations and political parties are still run by the “social elders”, who have had difficulty understanding the new generation’s approach. They also took a dim view of the new methods and digital tools disrupting acquired habits, “*They were used to carrying out conventional election observations with paper and a manual compilation data feedback system. When we came along with digital tools, we disrupted this whole system. You therefore have people who are older than you and who have difficulty accepting change. They see young people arriving with new methods, about to change everything or even revolutionise a field in which they have been working for a long time. Their first reaction was to try to ally themselves with political decision-makers to create obstacles and prevent us from achieving our objectives*”.

At the time of this interview, the specific objective to set up a National Youth Council (CNJ) in Guinea, in accordance with the recommendation of the AU's African Youth Charter (2006) to promote young people’s political participation, had still not been met. The process, nonetheless, had been announced several years previously (3 or 4 years before). “*The government's desire to control the institution has created tension amongst the youth, who want to remain independent. The project has therefore been frozen, even though everything is administratively up to speed*”. Despite this institutional blockage, however, young Guineans are increasingly aware of their political weight, as illustrated, in particular, by their mobilisation during the 2018 local elections. In the town of Faranah (Upper Guinea), a stronghold of President Alpha Condé's party, “*young people came together and decided to no longer let the old political parties retain power*”. They set up the Independent Movement for Local Development of Faranah (MIDLF), a list of young political candidates that won the municipal election in this agglomeration. “*In a way, they freed themselves from the traditional lists. In some communities they also managed to get elected to the local councils*”.

This youth dynamic, however, was soon subject to infighting. The movement split, with one of its factions choosing to support the controversial candidacy of President Alpha Condé for a third term in the 2020 elections, following a constitutional amendment that polarised the country<sup>130</sup>. This is clearly a disappointment for all those who had dreamed, in Faranah, of young people’s political empowerment and a break with the customary alignment with the traditional parties. This division reflects the increasingly fragility of new youth dynamics. “*In spite of the initiative, there have been no direct effects on the way public affairs are managed*”.

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129. Guinean Women of the 21st century, *The Blog of committed young Guinean women*.

130. Sabrina Achik, “Guinea: origins and risks of the constitutional crisis”, GRIP, 18 February 2020.

Generally speaking, young Guineans face two types of barriers to their participation and influence in the political arena. To be accepted as a candidate for public office one must, first of all, be a member of a political party and receive the party leaders' endorsement. The second barrier is age. To run for office in Guinea, one must be at least 35 years old. *"This provision was created by some political party leaders who were afraid of facing young candidates in elections, which can be more open, especially at local level"*. Unlike the initiative of the *Balai citoyen* in Burkina Faso, which had proposed the adoption of the principle of a youth quota on electoral lists, nothing of the sort was envisaged in Guinea. The quota principle has been adopted for promoting women's participation, with the requirement of a quota of at least 30% of women on party electoral lists, but this principle is far from being respected. The idea of a youth quota is not popular on the Guinean institutional landscape and would also pit the two most discriminated categories, women and youth, against each other in competition.



*BlogCamp224 (March 2021) The objective of this project was to provide twenty (20) bloggers and aspiring bloggers with the necessary skills to produce quality content on migration risks, legal migration routes and opportunities.*

*Local Governance and Accountability*

*The #OpenGuinea project is seeking Guinea's accession to the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the promotion of access to public information by local governments.*

The theme of transparent governance is a major cornerstone of ABLOGUI's action. Despite areas of concern about the evolving situation, the independent lists and citizen-led movements, it does provide an opportunity to test out ABLOGUI's Open Governance Programme at a local level. The aim is to promote greater transparency in governance, as well as an inclusive citizen participation process through information and communication technologies. In this perspective, the ABLOGUI collective has launched a collaborative initiative with the *Mairie de Kaloum* (Kaloum Town Hall) in central Conakry, which was won by an independent list in the 2018 municipal elections.

Initially, ABLOGUI aimed to assess the viability of the “open government” process with the Guinean authorities. The authorities, however, proved more enforcement oriented, while the leaders of the national institutions led by the presidential majority remained on their guard.

The spirit of openness and the leader's own trajectory explains why Kaloum Town Hall was chosen. The leader of the town hall does not come from a mainstream political party and owes their position to the dynamics affecting citizens on the ground. This is another example of young people becoming aware of the strength they have when they take initiatives to influence the political game, particularly at local level.

The Mayor of Kaloum's team does not exclusively consist of young people, but they were part of the citizen dynamics underpinning the independent list that led the candidacy of [Aminata Touré](#) to victory in 2018. Aminata Touré is a member of civil

society and the daughter of the first Guinean president Sékou Touré<sup>131</sup>. The new mayor's team signed an agreement with ABLOGUI as part of the Open Governance Programme (OGP), whereby Kaloum City Council commits itself to a process of total transparency. The ABLOGUI team helped develop and launch the Kaloum City Council's web platform. This platform allows citizens to access a variety of general information on the functioning of the municipality, council activities, services provided by the municipality, as well as information regarding town hall budget management. Citizens can consult the draft budget online, as well as the budget, and therefore learn to analyse and monitor the allocation of public resources by the municipal team. Kaloum City Council was supposed to continue and strengthen the project after its implementation but it has encountered difficulties in raising the necessary funding, due to the uncertainty of payments to the local councils by the urban metropolitan area.

Alpha Diallo points out that, “*Even when taxpayers pay their taxes, they do not reach the council's coffers*”. He believes that this is the fault of corruption and the state failing to meet its tax revenue redistribution commitments. The issue of tax redistribution is an obstacle to the effective functioning of local urban councils, despite the Agency for the Financing of Communes (AFICCON) having been set up in June 2021. Through AFICCON<sup>132</sup> (*Agence de financement des communes de Conakry*), the state has agreed to allocate 10% of the tax revenues generated by Conakry's port and airport utilities to finance development projects planned by the capital's local councils<sup>133</sup>.

### ***Coalition for Budget Transparency***

In order to boost its commitment to more transparent governance, ABLOGUI and other civil society associations formed COTEB, the Coalition for Transparency and Budgetary Efficiency. In its capacity as a bloggers' association specialising in digital technology, ABLOGUI approached academics and budget analysis specialists to provide COTEB with broader expertise. “*The coalition's primary objective is to ensure a minimum of budgetary transparency because the lack of sufficient public spending data makes it difficult for citizens to keep an eye on things*”. The budget is often executed by the government and other state bodies and is not known or does not appear in published documents, especially those posted online. COTEB's approach therefore involves coaxing state bodies to make public all documents related to the setting of the budget. Access to this data would help finetune budgetary analyses before and after budgetary debates so that recommendations can be made, and possible inconsistencies identified.

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131. Aminata Touré died in January 2022.

132. Le gouvernement guinéen met en place une nouvelle agence en faveur des communes de Conakry, *La Guineenne.info*, 1er July 2021.

133. *Labidi.org*: Analyse des promesses de la nouvelle gouvernance d'Alpha Condé et de son Gouvernement..



### ***Lahidi's Impact***

*Labidi's* citizen watch work is generating a lot of feedback. This includes exchanges of mail and occasional debates and direct discussions on social networks with account managers and ministers. *Labidi's* assessment<sup>134</sup> of the promises made by President Alpha Condé's second term, published in October 2020, had a wide impact<sup>135</sup>. According to the report's assessment, only 13% of government promises have been met or 40 out of the 315 commitments listed by *Labidi*. “*The drawing up of this report by political opponents made the authorities aware of the impact of the Lahidi project. After this report, we witnessed a greater willingness on the part of certain authorities to open up and work with us*”. The Collective also conducted a diagnosis of its global impact, “*We realise that we are in a country where not everyone has Internet access and that Lahidi is a platform that uses digital technology*”. With a view to diversifying the modes of communication, the Collective decided to focus more on the production of content adapted to social networks, adding audio-visual production and using traditional media. Despite the development of social networks, traditional media still has a lot of influence and a significant impact on a section of the public that *Labidi* cannot reach through social networks. “*We turn to these kinds of media to optimise impact and ensure that a maximum number of citizens are aware of government promises and that these promises are respected*”.

The Collective also needs to have roots at a local level, so that it can create a pledges map. This will assist it in setting up partnerships with local organisations for monitoring and following up what is being done at a local level.

### ***Pan-Africanism from Above and Below***

Although they are part of the *Africtivist* network and subscribe to the idea of a convergence of citizen initiatives on a continental scale, ABLOGUI members have reservations about the use of the term *pan-Africanist* itself. In the Guinean context, pan-Africanism is also often used by political actors as a concept for populist ends. This does not, however, rule out a pan-Africanist position towards cooperation between ABLOGUI and other citizen collectives, as in the case of the support given by Senegalese activists to *#Guinea vote*.

ABLOGUI does not have direct links with regional body representatives, although the latter have sometimes sought to meet with civil society actors during their visits. Together with other associations, however, ABLOGUI did refer the Guinean authorities to the ECOWAS Court of Justice Rapporteur in July 2021, for blocking the Internet<sup>136</sup>. Overall, activists often feel that they are better listened to by representatives of Western/European institutions than by representatives of African regional/sub-regional organisations. They are disappointed by this because they have seen that ECOWAS can influence Guinea, but they have no contact person in this connection. ABLOGUI does not have any relationship with the Anglophone network YADA ([Young African Defenders in Action](#)), whose objectives overlap with those of the Francophone groups using digital technology to enhance governance and the

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134. *Labidi.org* : Bilan du président Alpha Condé.

135. Promesses d'Alpha Condé (2015-2020) : Sur 82 promesses, seulement 13 % ont été réalisées (6e rapport de la plateforme Lahidi d'ABLOGUI), *Guineetime.com*, 3 September 2020.

136. [Communiqué on the Complaint against the Guinean State to the ECOWAS Court of Justice on Internet disconnection](#), 5 July 2021.

defence of human rights. ABLOGUI is supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), but also draws its resources from its consultancy and digital maintenance services for other civil society organisations and local institutions.

## Interview with Ousmane Miphil Lankoande, Balai citoyen Executive Secretary<sup>137</sup>

### *Positioning the Movement in the New Post-transitional Context*



There has been a refocusing on the essential issues that affect the basic needs of the population, such as access to water, health education and citizenship education, etc. There is also the idea of pursuing the citizen watch, with a particular focus on the local councils and their needs and programmes. By monitoring grassroots concerns, the movement intends to position itself primarily as a “political mediator” between the government and the governed.

As tools for action, *Le Balai citoyen* is engaged in close dialogue and the questioning of elected officials at public assemblies, as well as the creation of video clips broadcast on social networks (website/Facebook/Twitter, etc.), and radio broadcasts. It also challenges elected officials at national level on governance and security issues in the context of the deteriorating security situation in northern Burkina Faso. *Le Balai citoyen* is also organising major conferences and publishing statements of nation-wide interest.

The Collective intends to capitalise on the impact of its training programme specifically targeting young people, as part of the “Youth and Parliamentarians Alliance” project. This two-year project, launched in 2018, sought to improve the way in which the socio-economic and political interests of young people are taken into account, including their participation in parliamentary work, through the implementation of training and advocacy initiatives. The project targeted young members of *Le Balai Citoyen* from several localities including Ouagadougou, Koudougou, Bogandé, Dori, Tenkodogo and Pô. The Collective’s starting point was based on the observation that many young people had little knowledge about how the National Assembly operated or what role MPs played. The aim was therefore to equip them with socio-political analytical tools and to then encourage them to interact with parliamentarians and ensure the accountability of their local level elected representatives. The programme equipped a cohort of young people with a knowledge of the parliamentary system that facilitated their access to formal and informal decision-making spaces, while setting up platforms for interaction with elected officials. The project organised and networked young people in the target communities so they could develop a common advocacy agenda for MPs. This initiative also led to the signing of a framework agreement with the National Assembly. *Le Balai citoyen* and the young participants in the project developed an action strategy, including the introduction of a quota for young people on the electoral lists, with a view to the 2020 general elections, the recruitment of 127

137. Executive Secretary of *Balai citoyen*, online interview, January 2022. The interview was conducted before the coup d'état against President Roch-Marc Christian Kaboré on 23 January 2022. An additional interview was requested to integrate the movement's reaction to the context opened up by the coup.

young parliamentary assistants at the National Assembly and extended coverage of parliamentary radio throughout the country.

With regard to the means it has at its disposal, *Le Balai citoyen* draws its resources from subscriptions paid by its members and support from sympathisers. It also benefits from the financial backing of international development NGOs<sup>138</sup> active in the field of governance. All activities, however, are headed by *Le Balai citoyen*.

*Le Balai Citoyen* also uses strategic alliances to win support from other civil society organisations for its actions, which helps boost both the scope and reach of its activities.

At an organisational level, *Le Balai citoyen* has a General Assembly of about 3,000 members, according to the December 2021 census. Members come from the whole country and the different regions. According to Ousmane Lankoande the movement was mainly based in urban areas but there is now a growing interest in *Le Balai Citoyen* in rural areas.

Its organisation is based on four levels of coordination: national, regional, provincial and municipal.<sup>139</sup> At the grassroots level, in the neighbourhoods, *Le Balai citoyen* has a number of clubs, the CiBals (citizen sweepers), which have about ten members. The CiBals are the movement's grassroots cells, supervised by the focal point contacts, who liaise with national level coordinators.

In the period following the overthrow of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, some “grassroots” members expressed their wish to see *Le Balai citoyen* continue its street mobilisations and to remain in a permanent protest role, as it had done at the beginning of the movement. The strategy advocated by the national coordinators, however, focused on action through the available channels for accountability and dialogue. There has been some criticism of the movement's lack of assertiveness in the new context, which created a climate of dissension within the movement.

As Ousmane Lankoande points out, “*Le Balai citoyen does not see democracy as a continual power struggle. Activists must not become troublemakers and should use legal channels to express themselves and regenerate the democratic rules that allow for a different kind of political participation*”. When social tension increased and the security climate<sup>140</sup> and politics deteriorated during the “final days” of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's presidency, *Le Balai citoyen* decided not to participate in the demonstrations calling for the president's resignation. According to their analysis, this resignation could have led to a more serious institutional crisis.

The movement has therefore focused on its citizen watch activities. *Le Balai citoyen* is therefore working with the ***Présimètre***. The latter is a citizen watch and information sharing platform for civil society actors and citizen movements, which focuses on issues of democratic governance and public policy management<sup>141</sup> monitoring.

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138 Mainly the Swedish NGO Diakonia, and OXFAM.

139. For more detailed information on the organisational chart, see “African youth in search of change”, *op. cit.*

140. Since 2015, Burkina Faso has seen a rise in violence linked to the rise of jihadist groups, affiliated to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, whose attacks target civilians and the military mainly in the north and east of the country.

141. Presimeter, source: Home | Presimeter (presimetre.bf)

*Présimètre* monitors the extent to which the commitments made during the mandate of the current president have been met.

*The Collective* also produces audiovisual clips and brief reports on various issues (such as land issues) of interest to the public debate. The young people trained to report on local issues, particularly via social networks, carry out advocacy work with the authorities in an effort to ensure their accountability. Like many collectives, *Le Balai citoyen* musters the evocative power of artistic activities to support its actions: it organises Citizens' Caravans and educational concerts to reach a wide audience. In regions affected by insecurity and violence from extremist groups, however, activists are forced to act anonymously (by removing any reference to *Le Balai citoyen* from their clothing), to avoid being targeted by terrorist groups as activists of a pressure group defending a model of open and democratic society.

### ***The Position of Women in Le Balai citoyen***

Activists are aware of the under-representation of women in the leadership of the movement, as well as the difficulty of getting more women involved, particularly because of the socio-cultural and family constraints that still prevail. Although feminist ideas remain widely present in society, as a legacy of Thomas Sankara's governance, the sometimes violent nature of street protests, as well as the perception of citizen movements as a predominantly male preserve, are also deterrents to greater female participation. *Le Balai Citoyen*, however, can count on a variety of different profiles from its human resources (intellectuals, sponsors of both material and financial resources, etc.), including older women who act as godmothers and guarantors for families to encourage young women to join the movement. The issue of women's participation is even more acute in peri-urban and rural areas.

### ***Pan-Africanism and Alternatives***

*Le Balai citoyen* is a member of the *Afrikki* network, which aims to link up the citizen collectives' actions on the continent and in the diaspora around a pan-African agenda of citizen struggle. The network is characterised by its stance against repressive policies targeting citizen collectives and individual activists in many countries. It also sees itself as an activist protection mechanism. The network provides a place for reflection on the autonomy of citizen movements and seeks to identify funding models to reduce dependency on extra-continental donors. This approach is based on the idea that African organisations, donors and companies could support these movements financially and involves the organisation of strategies and meetings with these different actors. This reflection was underway at the time of this interview.

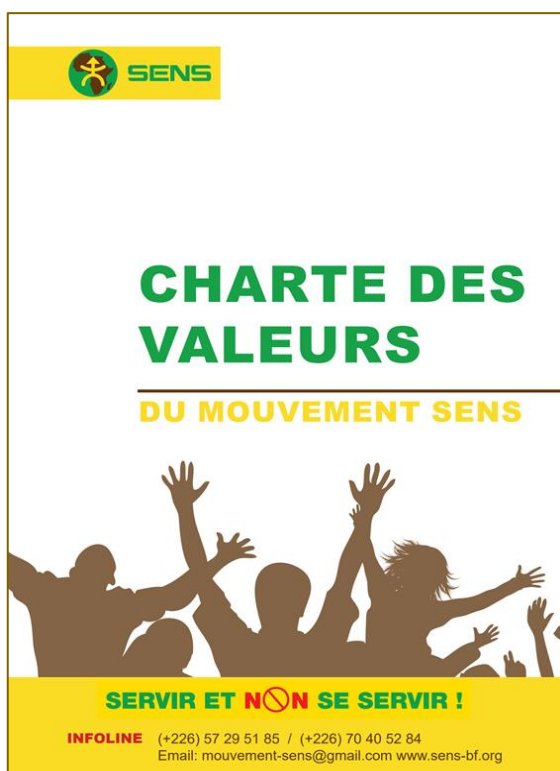
Supporting citizen movements is not without risks to local sponsors. The sometimes negative perception of these protest movements does not necessarily mix well with business! In order to avoid problems with the authorities, some people who financially support *Le Balai citoyen* are not keen to make this support public. Ousmane Lankoande has personally been denied access to certain national institutional posts because of his role in *Le Balai citoyen*. According to the Executive Secretary of the movement, the same situation has been repeated with European organisations in the country.

Nevertheless, the agreements that *Le Balai citoyen* signs with external donors are scrupulously framed and do not mean that the Collective's hands are tied. This is made

very clear when the agreements are signed. If there is any indication that the donor intends to interfere with the Collective's autonomy, *Le Balai citoyen* does not sign the funding agreement.

Ousmane Lankoande does, ultimately, recognise that there are certain limits to the citizen watch and accountability strategy, “*Our goals are limited to an ability to effectively influence decision-makers, because we do not control the levers of power to bring about the necessary changes*”. The fight against corruption is an area Lankoande uses to reinforce his argument, “*The government in place at the time went no further than making statements and did not adopt the decrees that would have facilitated implementation of anti-corruption policies*”. This leads him to conclude, “*No matter how much pressure you apply, if the political action is not forthcoming, the people end up losing interest and no longer believing in it*”. There is, therefore, a need to have a relay mechanism available in the political field, which Lankoande believes is the only way, “*to inspire different governance practices and change things*”. The creation of the SENS movement could contribute to this step (see below, the interview with Abdoulaye Diallo).

## Interview with Abdoulaye Diallo, SENS Movement<sup>142</sup>



The “SENS” movement was set up in August 2020 and is an offshoot of *Le Balai citoyen* but is not a partisan branch of the latter. It is the outcome produced by a core group of activists who have been active in the field of civic engagement for more than a decade, some of whom were among those who set up *Le Balai citoyen*. “Some of these actors wanted to take the step of going beyond citizen watch and create a new kind of political grouping. They left *Balai citoyen* and no longer have a role in the movement, because this is not authorised by the movement’s statutes”.

The creation of *SENS* is a natural evolution for this core group of activists. It is about exploring new ways of doing politics, with the acronym ‘SENS’ standing for “To serve and not

to be served”. Even if the results sought are not immediate, *SENS* intends to work towards developing a new generation of politicians in the long term.

### *The Breakdown and Rebuilding of a Political Movement*

According to Abdoulaye Diallo, politics was an area of such disfunction during the 27 years of Blaise Compaoré’s governance<sup>143</sup> that there is a clear distrust of politics throughout society. Consequently, the people expect and hope for a different way of doing things. Abdoulaye Diallo, who has run the *Centre national de presse Norbert Zongo*<sup>144</sup> for over 20 years, is also the promoter of the *Ciné Droit libre festival*<sup>145</sup>, a place of convergence and meeting place for all activists. Diallo explains that, “*Ciné Droit libre* was the incubator of *Le Balai citoyen* and the latter was a response to a pressing need at a particular time. We had all been activists in various organisations, but the young people were eager to be in an organisation and a form of civic engagement that better corresponded to them”.

After the protest phase in the context of the transition and then the following phase of citizen watch, the debate led internally by some of the activists concluded that a new stage was needed that went further than the citizen watch initiative. All those who

142. The interview was conducted in September 2021.

143. Came to power on 15 October 1987 in a coup against Thomas Sankara, in which Sankara and 12 of his collaborators were assassinated. Blaise Compaoré resigned on 31 October 2014 following a popular uprising, after attempting a constitutional reform to run for a final presidential term.

144. Created in 1988, the CNP-NZ’s mission is to promote and defend freedom of expression and of the press in Burkina Faso, with the aim of contributing to the strengthening of democracy both in Burkina Faso and in Africa in general. Since January 1999, the Centre has been named after the journalist Norbert Zongo, director of the newspaper *L’Indépendant* and a founding member of the CNP, who was assassinated on 13 December 1998.

145. Created in 2005, “Ciné Droit Libre” is the largest film festival on human rights and freedom of expression in French-speaking Africa.

advocated this stage and were united around the same ideas, came together to create the SENS movement. This is a major development compared to the initial positioning of the citizen movement, whose statutes do not allow members to hold office in political organisations. The creation of a new party also remains a challenge in a situation that is characterised by the disaffection of young people with mainstream political bodies and elections in general<sup>146</sup>. The initiative was inevitably met with scepticism, “*Many people objected on the grounds that politics is synonymous with corruption. But we felt that politics should not be left in the hands of those who are allegedly corrupt. It is no longer a question of using politics as a means of social climbing, but of defining ways of doing it differently, with principles. Even if we can't expect immediate results, SENS is counting on young people to pave new ways ahead*”.

### ***Rebuilding “from below”***

In November 2020, the Movement took part in the general election but failed to win a seat at the National Assembly. In June 2021, the Movement held its sovereign General Assembly to define its new strategic orientations, the implementation of which is overseen by its National Political Council. This first electoral exercise was particularly useful in laying the foundations for the national and pan-African strategic alliances that would enable the Movement to carry out its project of rebuilding and breaking with the past. The initial goal was to win and manage the local councils in 2022, before pursuing national level objectives by 2025. The coup d'état against President Kaboré in January 2022 forced the Movement to partially revise its strategy for the new transition period<sup>147</sup> and adapt to working more on ensuring territorial coverage, while training members in the perspective it had set itself: breaking with the past and rebuilding the *SENS* movement.

*SENS* is totally committed to a generational rebuild. In countries where almost 70% of the population is under 35, Abdoulaye Diallo points out that, “*Nothing solid can be built without taking into account two important social categories, youth and women. We have to do this. Our generation has a role to play as an interface and transmission belt. We have to provide the bridgehead over the generation gap. The new generation is not waiting, it is ready to take what is its due and we must prepare it for leadership and encourage it to do politics differently. This is why we wanted to send out a clear message during the November 2020 general election, by choosing a young woman, a 22-year-old student, as the head of the SENS list. We have a duty to promote youth. This rejuvenation is also contained in the National Coordination's organisational chart. We try to form young/older pairs at the different levels of responsibility. It is more difficult to have women, but we still have about 35% women and about 45% young people in the movement's organisational chart*”<sup>148</sup>. The aim is for the coordination to reflect the composition of the population and that young people and women make up the 70% in the organisational chart of the movement itself. This is a long-term process and an undertaking that *SENS* envisages

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146. The presidential and legislative elections of 22 November 2020 were marked by a low rate of youth participation despite the large number of young voters registered on the electoral roll (2,491,816 young people out of 6,467,091 voters). “2022 municipal elections: The youth of Bobo-Dioulasso sensitized to an effective participation”, *leFaso.net*.

147. The Burkinabe transition charter provides for general elections to be held in July 2024.

148. This coordination, which comprises 24 members from 12 secretariats, has a three-year mandate. It is made up of 37.7% women and 25% young people. See [Burkina Faso: le mouvement SENS s'interroge sur sa place dans l'arène](#), *lefaso.net*.

on a generational scale, in the hope of dismantling the obstacles to the participation of young people in politics.

***Strategic Alliances and Pan-Africanism***

The leaders of the *SENS* Movement are convinced that building a new alternative political force in Burkina Faso requires alliances and regrouping with parties and movements that share the same sensibilities, particularly parties of the Sankarist persuasion. The goal is to create an open alliance, around the *SENS* project, integrating a diversity of actors (trade unions, NGOs, social movements) following the example of the pillarization model in force in certain large contemporary democracies. The *SENS* project also contains a pan-African dimension in its conceptualisation, “*We are thinking of a pan-African movement because for us, the solutions to Africa's challenges require a global approach. The initiatives carried out on an African scale must be adapted to each region and country on the continent*”. The main idea is to align the internal emancipation and democratisation processes of countries with a continent-wide integration and emancipation process, “*Africa feeds the rest of the world due to the stranglehold of external powers on our resources and by leveraging corruption, which perpetuates the influence of former colonial powers on our leaders. Pan-Africanism and the innovative spirit of youth provide Africans with an opportunity to take charge of their destiny and I have confidence in the innovative spirit of these young people*”.



### Interview with Martial PA'NUCCI<sup>149</sup>

Martial Pa'nucci is an artist and rapper from the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) and a founding member of the citizen's collective “*Ras-le-Bol*”. In an effort to escape the increasingly hostile political climate in which activists had to operate, he was exiled to Burkina Faso in October 2016 and is in charge of international communication for the Collective. In his absence, he was named “Best Hip Hop Artist of the Year 2016” at the Congo Urban Music Festival Beat Street Awards. His repertoire is emblematic of the spirit of protest, denunciation of social injustice and new activists’ irreverence towards the persisting authoritarianism in different countries on the continent. Martial Pa'nucci is a product of his time and owes his growing fame to the social networks and digital platforms through which his musical creations are distributed.



Moyi Mbourangon is his real name and he has a Bachelor of Arts degree in African literature and civilisation. He is also the author of two collections of poetry<sup>150</sup> and a total of four albums, of which the album # 2015 *Chroniques*, contains the flagship track “*Lettre ouverte aux présidents d’Afrique*”. This is widely distributed on social networks and has brought the artist to the attention of the public at large.

#### ***Ras-le-Bol (Fed Up)***

The *Ras-le-Bol* Citizens’ Collective defines itself as a non-violent citizen movement, which campaigns for the respect of human rights, justice and social progress by increasing citizens’ awareness.

149. The interview was conducted in September 2021.

150. “Le Poids des maux”, is his 1<sup>st</sup> collection published in March 2016 by Éditions Chapitre.com. “Pour que l’humain survive”, is the second collection, published in 2019 by Éditions Bomoto.

The movement claims several hundred members in the diaspora and throughout the country, including 200 active members. Most of the members are from urban areas, but the Collective also intends to reach out to rural communities. Initially conceived as a non-violent direct citizen action movement, *Ras-le-Bol* was confronted from the outset by the increasingly tough political climate and shrinking civic space. The Collective was created in 2015, in a context of opposition to the third term of President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who was in power between 1979 and 1992, and again from 1997. A controversial constitutional referendum held on 25 October 2015 abolished presidential term limits and allowed the president to stand for re-election in the presidential elections of 20 March 2016. The opposition's challenge to Denis Sassou Nguesso's victory was subsequently subject to a large-scale crackdown, characterised by arrests and an uncorroborated number of victims<sup>151</sup>. It was in this context that Martial Pa'nucci and some of his comrades were forced into exile.

The new electoral cycle in March 2021, coincided with a climate of increased restrictions on freedoms, linked to measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. As Martial Pa'nucci points out, “*Authoritarian regimes such as the one in Congo have taken advantage of the pandemic to restrict civic space and limit the freedom to demonstrate. Congo is one of the only countries to have maintained strict lockdown measures for two years*”. This context of restricted freedoms and bans on public gatherings has forced the members of the movement to prioritise training activities (screening documentaries on citizenship education, debates, knowledge of texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of the African Court of Human Rights, etc).

To avoid any risk of arrest, activists opted for symbolic actions, “*The country has remained what it has always been. Namely, a police state, where we are not allowed to carry out direct confrontational action. During this period of restrictions, individual members tried to do a Facebook live event. One of our activists was arrested and was only released from prison three months after his arrest*”.

*Ras-le-Bol* has remained a de facto association. Indeed, it has never received legal recognition because of the reluctance of the authorities to register it, “*When we created the Collective in 2015 with artist friends and students, we wanted to file the acts and regulations with the Ministry of the Interior. The Director General of the National Police, however, informed us that that if we wanted to be registered, we had to find another name for the movement. As long as we called it Ras-le-Bol, the movement would never exist and the authorities would not issue us a receipt*”. The Collective never received any update in this connection afterwards, but it was able to develop its activities thanks to partnerships with others, such as the OCDH, the Congolese Human Rights Observatory. This partnership means the Collective can benefit from funding for its awareness-raising and training activities, even though the Collective does not legally exist.

The members of the Collective consider that, “*The most fundamental act of an activist is to speak out*”. Given the lack of opportunities to demonstrate in the public arena, this speaking out is undertaken more frequently on social networks, which remain the only means of circumventing the obstacles to the free expression of the citizen movements and challenging the state's monopoly on the main traditional means of communication. The measures taken in Congo-Brazzaville, as in other countries (Guinea, DRC) to cut off or limit telephone and Internet communications during electoral processes,

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151. “[Congo Brazzaville : Vague croissante d'arrestations d'opposants](#)”, *Amnesty International*, 31 March 2016.

highlight the impact of this expression through social networks on national debates. Martial Pa'nucci explains, *“Social networks have an undeniable impact on the activist work we undertake. More and more young people go online because they are looking for information, especially when demonstrations or actions are being decided. There is always direct contact afterwards. Proximity facilitates mobilisation on the basis of trust, because they see who they are dealing with. Then there are appeals launched by well-known personalities, which also allow messages to be sent out, particularly on certain online media, which are more accessible”*.

Citizen movements, however, are not immune to pressures that undermine the resolve of some of their members, as shown by the departure of members of *Ras-le-Bol* who sought to set up another movement with more mainstream political goals.

### ***Art for Changing the Political Imagination***

Artistic expression remains an essential vector for mobilising citizens and networking. Despite exile in Burkina Faso, Martial Pa'nucci's music has expanded his audience beyond his host country, with his fame now reaching Europe. From an audience of 600 at his biggest show in Burkina Faso, the artist has been programmed for festivals with thousands of people, *“Everywhere I went, in France, Belgium and Germany, I attempted to address citizens by denouncing the continuation of certain dysfunctional practices of their leaders, who perpetuate neo-colonial relations with the African continent, at a time when more and more voices are being raised against these practices and African youth are demanding more accountability from their leaders and international partners”*.

While his music is effectively banned in Congo, especially in the local media, the public can, nevertheless, access it via social networks and online platforms. The feedback he receives attests to the influence of Martial Pa'nucci's music on some of the youth in his home country, *“I think my message is getting through, and people confirm this in return, when they feel that we also need artists who don't just dance and entertain, but who make people think by asking essential questions about the future of both the African continent and the rest of the world.”*

Although his activism is still subject to persisting threats, even from afar, this attests to the fact that his musical approach is having a real impact. This was felt once again in December 2020, when Martial Pa'nucci travelled to Senegal to participate in the *Université populaire de l'engagement citoyen (UPEC)*. *“I was detained at Blaise Diagne airport, where I spent five days sleeping on the floor. I received no notification about anything until I made a scene by making a video that immediately went viral on the Internet. This helped change the situation. I received a note saying that I was banned from entering Senegal for threatening public order. This indicated that there were connections between the Senegalese and Congolese regimes. The idea was to expel me to Congo, so that the regime could get their hands on me”*. The artist believes he escaped deportation to Congo because he was travelling with a Burkinabe and ECOWAS document attesting to his refugee status. Martial Pa'nucci explains, *“This proves that I am being heard and that I am being followed closely”*. It is particularly thanks to the mobilisation of all the collectives present at the meeting in Senegal that the artist managed to be expelled to Burkina and not to Congo.

**Open Letter to the Presidents of Africa (Martial Pa'nucci)**

Heug, heug  
Yoka, Yoka  
Listen Dear Presidents  
You have been at Africa's helm for nearly sixty  
years  
And so few years were needed to murder  
More African leaders than the settlers in four  
hundred years  
And in so doing you have almost whitewashed  
their crimes  
Like slavery  
Yet it has caused thousands of deaths  
That you have hidden  
By treading on history  
You have trampled on their memory  
Without hesitation  
Dear Presidents  
In less than half a century of governance  
You have transformed hospitable Africa into a  
carnivore  
Who devores his own sons  
Into a shrew  
Who sends them to their deaths  
In makeshift boats  
Who drown with all their hopes in the Atlantic  
You who control her destiny  
You have transformed Africa into a land  
unliveable  
Where civil wars decimate her sons by the  
thousands, it's horrible  
But since our misfortunes make you happy you  
do not yield  
Dear Presidents  
By turning your back on our Civilisation you have  
betrayed our ancestors  
And now the only path to knowledge it that of  
traitors  
You make laws that plunge us into the unknown  
and misery  
Laws that gnaw at us in irony and mockery  
Whilst you perpetrate traditions of shame  
Like Franco-Africa  
You reduce Africa to begging  
The hand that gives is that of the West  
And the hand that charms is from enchanted Asia  
The wealth of Africa develops other continents

Meanwhile she gets stuck and starves her sons  
She herself is breaking no wonder she beseeches  
Christ  
Dear Presidents  
Instead of governing  
You spend your time stealing  
Instead of respecting fundamental laws you  
tamper with them  
You rape the people out of political desire  
And when we take to the streets to demand  
respect for the law  
You slaughter us like beasts of burden  
We are those you knock down without reason  
Just like/ those who disappear without prayers  
You squander what is rightfully ours  
You set yourselves up as despots  
You transform countries into your homes where  
you rule with your families and your caravans  
pass  
Whilst our democratic hopes drown and bark  
Oligarchs you are  
You foment wars with your henchmen  
And you coldly decimate the people you starve in  
ghettos  
We want real hospitals  
And not these places where people are left to die  
without doctors  
And saints are lacking  
While you run to the West for treatment  
Dear Presidents  
Before for forced labour  
The slavers used to take us by force now we are  
all taking the journey alone into the unknown to  
escape the hell you create  
To suffocate us  
You rely on the people just to save your own arse  
Today even justice is sinking  
When the West corners you  
You then dig up Pan-African speeches  
You forget you are the first sad smiths  
Of these double-edged blades that one day will  
cut off your heads  
Because oppression only gives birth to revolt  
Just as your African-style democracy only gives  
birth to monsters  
You complain about neo-colonialism!

But you have sold out Lumumba, Sankara and  
betrayed Gadhafi  
And you boast of having freed Mandela  
He who would be turning in his grave  
In seeing the monsters you have become after just  
two terms  
Dear Presidents  
You all claim to be fighting  
To develop Africa  
But you close the borders and prevent Africans  
from communicating  
While you steal its cash  
Which you stash in Swiss bank accounts  
And if you only eat chicken legs  
You encourage brain drain/capital flight  
And skilful hands  
The Slave Trade emptied the continent of its  
brains and able bodies  
Here you are continuing the work  
Keeping the monkey money  
You use it  
And drive mother earth to perdition  
But by tradition  
You are being watched and know  
That a mother's anger is like that of the skies  
Just as the fury of revolt  
Does not spare the shovels  
That dig the continent's vaults  
There is no escape for any of these governing  
gravediggers  
Open the borders  
And in the face of the African Union's silence the  
muzzle we break  
We want an African Union of peoples  
We want to bite into peace with all our teeth or  
the boat will tip over and heads will roll  
And the Revolution will be anything but  
mainstream  
#2015CHRONIQUES,  
© Martial Pa'nucci alias Moyi Mbourangon  
He is not my president...  
Ahnn Yeah! Martial Pa'nucci mwana mayi  
Yoka, yoka, it's Zwaaa! Braaaaaaaaaaahhhh!  
[Refrain]  
A president who steals is not my president  
A president who kills is not my president  
Presidents who kill are not my presidents  
Presidents who steal are not my presidents

Alpha Condé is not my president  
Alassane Ouattara is not my president (No no)  
IBK is not my president (No, no, no)  
And even Macky Sall is not my president  
They pretend to govern  
Meanwhile they all steal  
They pretend to love us  
It is in misery that they knock us all down  
All in all we suffer the same trials  
In these heated times we are all unemployed  
Scraps upon scraps we're rummaging around  
And the grazing sheep become a pain in the arse  
And we get confused  
On the road to recovery  
While their sons, daughters  
Granddaughters and grandsons  
Come and taunt us  
With money looted  
From the coffers of our states  
Tell me who will challenge it  
If you haven't noticed  
No more cold feet  
Since Ben Ali, Mubarak, Compaoré  
And Yahya Jammeh have been removed  
Hold the line and we'll clear them out!  
[Refrain]  
A president who steals is not my president  
A president who kills is not my president  
Presidents who kill are not my presidents  
Presidents who steal are not my presidents  
Sassou Nguesso is not my president (No no)  
Paul Biya is not my president  
Idriss Deby is not my president  
And even Tshisekedi is not my president  
We're not thugs, don't be taken in  
You're the one who's making a mockery of  
everything - how to feel worthy  
While in our countries you liquidate everything  
Oil, Gold, Manganese  
Uranium and even our cities  
Diamonds, Iron, Cobalt  
Cocoa, our Land, our Water  
And when things get crazy as with Corona  
Are we to be used as guinea pigs again?  
NO!  
Like guinea pigs?

NO! NO!  
Like guinea pigs?  
NO!  
There is no doubt that countries are down  
Because you are selling out!  
And when the young person loses her life in  
search of Eldorado  
There are no gifts, no applause  
It's open-air mass graves under a cover of twaddle  
Using makeshift boats  
Desert without fortunes  
In winter it stinks of death  
And this is where everyone gets aggrieved  
While we're at it:  
Who signs bogus contracts with Total  
What about all those financial mining companies  
of Franco-Africa?  
Crimes are recognised  
The culprits well known  
Who will be targeted  
If our justice system pisses on us?  
[Refrain]  
A president who steals is not my president  
A president who kills is not my president  
Presidents who kill are not my presidents  
Presidents who steal are not my presidents  
Ali Bongo is not my president  
Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi is not my president (No, no)  
Museveni is not my president  
And even Faure Gnassingbé is not my president  
[Outro].  
But Thomas Sankara  
He is my president  
Patrice Lumumba  
He is my president  
Modibo Kéita  
He is my president  
Sylvanus Olympio  
He is my president  
Kwame Nkrumah  
He is my president  
Marcus Garvey  
He is my president  
Winnie Mandela  
She is my president  
Félix Moumié

He is my president  
Ruben Um Nyobè  
Mehdi Ben Barka  
Steve Biko  
Martin Luther King Jr.  
Malcolm X  
Haile Selassie I  
André Grenard Matsoua  
Mamadou Dia  
And all the other Martyrs are my presidents..

© Martial Pa'nucci alias Moyi Mbourangon

## Interview with N' Dongo Samba Sylla<sup>152</sup>

*How should we interpret and characterise the citizens' movements' recent trajectory and their ability to formulate or embody proposals for systemic change that go further than the initial position of protest and denunciation?*

The current context is particularly difficult and can be characterised by a dynamic of democratic regression. The era of extended mandates was thought to be over, but it seems to be reoccurring given the attempts by certain leaders to cling to power, bolstered by passivity and the implicit support of external partners. The forces most opposed to this current trend are not the most progressive and include the military, as illustrated by the case of Guinea, in addition to the conventional political opposition parties.

The origins of the citizens' anger movement in Senegal in March 2021<sup>153</sup> or the fall of President Alpha Condé<sup>154</sup> in Guinea in September 2021 did not stem from the citizen movements' initiative, but from spontaneous movements of revolt, which eventually led to the participation of the citizen movements. The latter no longer seem to have the same strength for taking action or mobilising.

New demands have emerged, including the hostility towards the presence of French economic interests in Senegal, which were not taken up by the mainstream citizen movements. Citizen movements no longer contain the same impetus. In the specific case of Senegal, there are several social fronts mobilising the same actors. These include actors from the citizen movements, which have merged with all the other movements into a broad movement driven by oppositional forces.

Connections exist between the rank-and-file citizen movements, protest movements and mainstream oppositional movements. There are multiple affiliations and the same people can be part of both the oppositional movements or other protest movements.

The relative decline in the attractiveness of the citizen movements can be explained by changes to the particular situation to which this attractiveness was linked. Challenging the power of politicians is not enough and requires a definition of how to move towards even more competent and democratic political regimes. Without this bold approach, the movements lose impetus.

Many social actors still see elections as a formatted exercise, which is accompanied by the belief that political legitimacy is only achieved through elections. There is no other vision of how to do politics, which limits the role of the citizen movements and they remain, to some extent, confined to activities related to electoral cycles (question of the representativeness of the CENI, revision of the electoral register, etc.).

The nature of the citizen movements makes them dependent on the agendas of other socio-political actors (military, political, etc.). Having a long-term vision and putting forward perspectives for social transformation, requires a political vision, expressed in the framework of a programme. By claiming to be "politically neutral", the citizen

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152. Économiste, chercheur à Rosa Luxemburg-Dakar, septembre 2021.

153. N'Dongo Samba Sylla, "Une jeunesse laissée pour compte : Les cinq 'coléreuses' secouent le Sénégal", *Dakar Echo.com*, 31 March 2021.

154. The coup d'état perpetrated on 5 September 2021 by an elite unit of the Guinean army - the *Groupement des forces spéciales* - against President Alpha Condé, took place against a backdrop of economic recession, and in a climate of political repression, linked to the contestation of the re-election of the incumbent president, whose new mandate was made possible by an opportunistic constitutional reform.

movements are reduced to playing the role of an auxiliary force for conventional oppositional movements and become relatively marginalised in terms of representativeness. Popularity and media coverage should also be highlighted, as a media profile is no guarantee of popularity. The citizen movements are media-friendly but not necessarily popular. The opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko<sup>155</sup>, is sometimes called the “president of social networks” and is a leading figure who manages to combine the two poles - popularity and media coverage - at a time when online platforms are also spaces for political confrontation.

*Some citizen movement actors have shifted towards setting up political parties and now wish to participate in the electoral game. This is the case of the SENS movement in Burkina Faso, which is an offshoot of the Balai citizen. It claims that it is seeking to transform the political system from within and working from a generational angle.*

The Senegalese context is specific. The case of Fadel Barro<sup>156</sup> and his willingness to enter both the politico-partisan sphere and political game is a matter of individual choice. His programme is not known<sup>157</sup> and historically few political actors, especially at the municipal level, are elected on the basis of a programme. Ousmane Sonko is the first leader to have a programme-based approach, which is set out in a book entitled “Solutions”. Sonko was able to connect to his audience of young people around the themes of transparency, anti-colonial struggle and breaking with the past.

The desire to be an agent of change by entering the political game also exposes citizen movement actors to the risks inherent in the practices of the political arena such as being smeared or treated like other opposition actors, who are commonly targeted by repressive practices and destabilisation strategies. Despite electoral and democratic propriety, the Senegalese political game is tainted by a climate of repression and the members and leaders of YAM have been targeted by strategies to destabilise and smear them.

The rappers Kilifeu and Simon Kouka, founding members of YAM, were filmed without their knowledge and accused of taking part in a diplomatic passport trafficking ring. The images filmed by a young criminal who was subsequently incarcerated were “leaked”, probably on purpose, while an MP arrested for currency trafficking and others involved in the same trafficking of the diplomatic passports, were shown considerable leniency. This context of repression is a factor in the radicalisation of the protest movements.

Local political systems also remain subject to external influences and lack autonomy from foreign interests<sup>158</sup>. The social unrest in March 2021 was partly a challenge to

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155. He is a member of the National Assembly, leader of the Patriotes du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF) party, the main opponent of President Macky Sall, and was elected mayor of the city of Ziguinchor (southern Senegal) in the January 2022 elections.

156. A founding member and former coordinator of *Y'en a marre*, Fadel Barro ran unsuccessfully for the mayor's office in the city of Kaolack (300,000 inhabitants, located in the centre of the country) in the January 2022 municipal elections.

157. The elements of Fadel Barro's programme were detailed later and concern the idea of a reappropriation of governance at the local level by citizens, within the framework of a participatory municipal democracy to resolve the needs of the population at the grassroots, around the concept of dignity “[Jammi gox yi](#)”.

158. N'Dongo Samba Sylla “Une jeunesse laissée pour compte”, *op. cit.*



this subordination, although there were corresponding motives (social fracture and the perceived politicisation and instrumentalisation of the legal system).

Many social actors still largely think of political change in terms of a change of government or opposition to a third term for President Macky Sall<sup>159</sup>. The question of a third term for the outgoing president in 2024 is expected to really test Senegal's stability. It could be described as the calm before the storm. The reaction of the Senegalese army, until now very respectful of institutions, should be assessed in the event of a major crisis.

The religious brotherhoods are another influential social actor in Senegalese society. Their major socio-political influence<sup>160</sup> was highlighted during the mass protest in March 2021. The brotherhoods are, however, subject to criticism and their role considered ambivalent. Although they assume a regulatory role that compensates for the failure of state institutions, they also defend their own interests. They intervene, above all, when the situation degenerates but do not always act in a pre-emptive way.



*The Pan-African Dimension of Struggle*

The citizen movements' convergence and the sharing of experiences are necessary. It is important for movements to learn from each other and to address systemic issues that are not limited to the case of individual countries: African countries are currently in a similar situation to that which prevailed at the time of "nominal political independence". The issue of sovereignty is becoming more acute. Social movements can play a major role if they integrate the question of democracy and economic and social issues, as well as those of sovereignty, including sovereignty over the continent's resources.

159. Elected in March 2012 and re-elected in February 2019, despite the two-term limit introduced by a constitutional revision approved in 2016.

160. By obtaining through mediation the suspension of popular demonstrations following the arrest of the opponent Ousmane Sonko, synonymous with the risk of violence. "[Sénégal: nouvelle manifestation à risque reportée après une médiation des religieux](#)", *lefigaro.fr*, 12 March 2021.

## Farida Nabourema, Human Rights Defender and Coordinator of the Togolese Civic League<sup>161</sup>

### *Trajectory and Journey of an Activist*

In 2011, Farida Nabourema co-founded the #Faure Must Go movement, which is one of the citizen and pro-democracy protest frameworks in Togo. She also coordinates the Togolese Civic League, a group of pro-democracy activists, which she co-founded in 2017. Following in the footsteps of her father, an opponent of President Gnassingbé Eyadema<sup>162</sup>, Farida Nabourema is a veteran activist in Togo's political scene. She represents the section of “disillusioned African youth<sup>163</sup>”, which questions the superficiality of an electoralist democratic model of facade, characterised by authoritarianism and a latent crisis of legitimacy, “*It was at the age of 15 that I got my first political party card in the opposition. And what motivated my political struggle in Togo was the arrest of my father in 2003, when I was still 13 years old. He had been arrested during a meeting of his party, together with two other militants and the wife of one of them, who was also present at the meeting and who was then detained with her 8-month-old baby. This event had a big impression on me and as soon as my father was released from prison, I wanted to join the resistance. I got closer to him, and I started to take part in demonstrations and party meetings*<sup>164</sup>”.

This militant trajectory was confirmed at the turn of 2005, when Gnassingbé Eyadéma died unexpectedly, raising hopes for change and an opening up of the political space. The elections organised two months after the president's death were won by Faure Gnassingbé, who succeeded his father in a climate of strong protest and repression of protesters, “*On the day of the elections, a serious incident occurred which affected the Togolese people significantly. As we were going from polling station to polling station, on the evening of the elections, to collect the results, which showed the opposition in the lead, soldiers arrived at the last polling centre. They started shooting tear gas, live ammunition and beating up anyone who moved. I think I and most of the people who were in that office at the time were lucky to survive because anyone could have been shot*”. According to human rights organisations<sup>165</sup> the violence is believed to have resulted in hundreds of casualties.

This election was marked by violence and involved one crisis after another. It was finally concluded by an agreement, the 2006 Global Political Agreement. In this agreement, President Faure Gnassingbé made several commitments. The first commitment was that he would not run for a second term. In the second commitment he agreed to reform the national electoral commission for organising inclusive general elections. The third commitment included the demilitarisation of politics and the withdrawal of the military from the political scene. “*And there was a whole series of reforms, which, if they had been carried out, could have paved the way for truly transparent and non-violent elections.*” Nabourema points out, however, that not even one of his commitments was fulfilled, “*So a lot of other young people and I felt frustrated by going back to elections in the knowledge that the regime had not kept its promises and had not made the necessary reforms to ensure transparency. So, we said to ourselves that we would not continue with elections that we knew were*

161. Interview conducted in October 2021.

162. In power from 1967 to 2005, Gnassingbé Eyadema had acceded to power through a coup d'état.

163. This is how the activist signs his analysis posts on social networks.

164. *Idem*.

165. “Togo – un an après les violences meurtrières d'avril 2005, l'impunité reste totale”, *Amnesty International*, 26 April 2006.

*lost in advance*<sup>166</sup>. This family succession means that Togo is one of the few African countries that has not experienced a real political transition leading to an alternation of power. The struggle of citizen movements in this country is therefore characterised by a certain specificity.

### **“Non-violent Guerrilla Warfare”**

In 2008, Farida Nabourema went abroad to study at university. Being away from Togo provided the young activist with an opportunity to shed light about the situation in her country and discuss it with the outside world and Togolese people, free from censorship. This involved creating a blog, one of the very first blogs devoted to Togolese political issues. With support from activists and journalist friends, this blog made it possible to expose certain corruption scandals, a subject that local journalists could not cover without the risk of going to prison.

Together with a group of African and Togolese activists from the diaspora, the activist co-founded the **Formation** movement in 2010, whose sole objective is to bring down the regime of President Faure Gnassingbé in Togo. *“So that's how I left the mainstream opposition political party to become a leader of a movement. The leader and spokesperson of the Formation movement. We had decided that the movement would be completely decentralised and that we would not have a conventional structure or movement president or coordinator roles, but simply a spokesperson”*. The appointment of Farida Nabourema as spokesperson was based on three criteria, *“I was the youngest and I was a woman. Fellow travellers in the struggle thought that as soon as they saw a young woman as the spokesperson for the movement this would attract young people and women to the movement”*. In the meantime, the 2011 mass uprisings in the MENA region (North Africa and the Middle East) also raised the question of the possibility of similar “revolutions” in sub-Saharan Africa relevant again.

At an organisational level, the movement opted for decentralised actions, so that Togolese youth interested in getting involved in the movement could organise themselves at different levels, *“So, we raised funds, sent money to the country and all those interested in organising activities. We funded a plethora of activities in the country and in the diaspora. We saw ourselves as non-violent guerrillas, in the sense that we were not armed, but we were part of a strategy of civil disobedience and defiance against the government”*. Action took the form of rallies or threats of rallies to disrupt foreign visits of Togolese leaders, ministers, military officials, etc., announced in different countries. The activists would show up or announce that they were going to cause trouble in order to disrupt the authorities concerned. On several occasions, the visits were cancelled.

Another specific form of action involved collecting members of the government and parliament's telephone data, to post on the blog. Hundreds of activists then called them to ask them to limit the number of presidential terms. This was particularly successful, leading to a special session of parliament on the case of the diaspora youth *“who wanted to force parliamentarians to change the constitution against their will”*.

By exposing cases of embezzlement and corruption involving members of the government or the leaders' lavish spending abroad, the activists also highlighted the contrast between the standard of living of the people and that of the ruling class. *“Although the Togolese government sometimes equated us with terrorist organisations because we inspired a certain amount of terror, we were never violent and never physically attacked, harassed or*

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166. Interview conducted in October 2021.

destroyed property. We simply wanted fear to change sides, according to the slogan of the Formation movement. We wanted to be young people who no longer lived in fear and that the people who had terrorised us and kept us in fear for decades could also feel the fear, when they saw youth mobilising against them”.

## The Position of Women in the Movements’ Leadership

Farida Nabourema explains, “I actually disagree that women are uncommon in political, civic or revolutionary activism in Africa. I know more women in this resistance on the continent than I know men. They are the ones who mobilise the masses, they are the ones who raise funding, they are the ones who feed and care for the wounded activists, they are the ones who shelter the displaced, they are the ones who raise awareness from door to door, but they are totally overshadowed when it comes to decision making”. She points out that this exclusion is often caused by the women themselves, who voluntarily withdraw, thinking that they should “let the men do the talking”. The women most visible in leadership are those who understand the need to be “at the decision-making table” and who assert their presence and refuse to back away, “We have women leaders of political parties in Togo and women entrepreneurs. Togolese women have always been very socially involved. Moreover, some of them have always been considered as the financial backers of the opposition”. In this connection this militant activist questions the responsibility of the Togolese government in the two fires that occurred in the two most important markets of the capital. She says that the government “burnt down the big market of Lomé where the women traders are based and who have for a long time supported the actions of the Togolese opposition”<sup>167</sup>. Since colonial times, Togolese women have been very involved in politics. When the French colonial authorities decided to increase taxes after the economic crisis of 1929, Togolese women responded by organising a collective revolt, “They marched on the District Commander’s Residency, totally destroyed the local administration premises, ransacked properties and freed the prisoners who had been detained for denouncing the tax increase. This shows how we have a history of women being very involved in politics in Togo”<sup>168</sup>.

### Youth Membership

The growing number of young men and women joining the **Formation** movement was partly the result of a confrontation between the spokesperson of this movement and a Togolese public authority, in this case the Minister of Security. The latter had made repeated verbal attacks on Farida Nabourema that initially had a dissuasive effect on young women thinking of joining the movement because they were afraid of being the target of similar attacks. The turning point came when the Minister of Security and Civil Protection openly threatened the activist in a radio broadcast, challenging her to return to Togo.

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167. In January 2013, the market of Kara (3e city of the country, 450 km north of Lomé) had been devastated by fire, and 48 hours later, the large market of Lomé had suffered the same fate. An investigation by the authorities implicated several opposition leaders, who were charged under procedures that were considered arbitrary and contested by the interested parties and the Togolese diaspora. Peaceful demonstrations took place, while a counter-investigation later implicated the Togolese authorities. See Edmond d’Almeida, “Il y a trois ans, les incendies des marchés de Lomé et de Kara bouleversaient le Togo”, *Jeune Afrique*, 12 January 2016.

168. “[Market Women Of Lomé: African feminist ancestors](#)”, *African Feminist Forum*, 14 March 2016.

The young activist used the first “Extraordinary Summit on Maritime Safety and Security and Development in Africa” held in the country as an opportunity to return to Togo in October 2016 and in so doing undermined the effectiveness of the Minister's threats. *“People found it extremely brave. Most of them had never taken me seriously, because I was from the diaspora and living abroad”*. This action proved the young activist's determination and inspired other young people to get involved. *“This is the biggest impact my activism has had and one that I am proud of today. It is because of this affront to the Togolese authorities and the denunciations I made openly in extremely radical language that fear was broken. This completely exposed the authorities and helped strengthen free speech. There are now young people denouncing abuses in Togo, which was not possible a decade ago because people were excessively afraid to speak out and hold the government to account. Even if this is not the case for the whole population, there is a large part of it that is no longer afraid to speak out, which is already a big step.”*

### ***The Togolese Civic League***

The *Togolese Civic League* (LCT) was set up in 2017. It is a formal organisation that seeks to promote dynamic and progressive democracy in Togo, by fostering civic engagement and the active participation of the Togolese people in the country and from the Diaspora. The *LCT* is committed to promoting the rule of law and protecting whistle blowers and human rights defenders in Togo. The League seeks to provide resources to the latter and in cases of arbitrary arrest, it provides financial, political and media support to obtain their release. The League also organises training for Togolese journalists and citizens, so they are better equipped to deal with digital security issues. In this specific area, it involves countering the Togolese state's use of the Pegasus software for tracking down its opponents. Pegasus is a spyware designed to attack iOS and Android smartphones and is marketed by an Israeli company, the NSO Group. The League also seeks to document and denounce corrupt practices in Togo. The *LTC*'s values are such that it does not receive any funding from international organisations. Its funding is based on contributions from its members, especially those in the diaspora, who have agreed to pay a monthly “resistance tax” equivalent to 3% of their salary. The idea is based on the fact that Togo does not tax its diaspora, contrary to other countries. The tax is linked to residency and not to Togolese citizenship. Contributions from members of the Togolese diaspora enable the League to plan and carry out different areas of action.

## Conclusions

Tracing the citizen movements' trajectory in sub-Saharan Africa involves directly engaging with a history that is still in the making, as well as a "fleeting" exercise in socio-political analysis. An evaluation of these movements' contributions to decisive systemic change will need to be assessed over a long period of time.

In the light of current developments, it seems premature to decree that the influence of the new citizen movements and their role as a driving force is now over. The first phase of the emergence of these citizens' collectives reminds us that societal changes are, to a large extent, the result of multi-class alliances between different actors and the outcome of an often unpredictable encounter between the structural factors within a specific context and the cyclical factors brought about by history.

No single social actor has ever determined the course of history.

The diversity and flexible profiles contained within the social movements are current structuring factors that will play a coordinating role in the development of new organisations, actors and action. This has been the case with student and trade union movement actors in previous cycles.

The new citizen movements are heirs to the movements and actors from the waves of protest that preceded them. They are also catalysts for the future developments taking shape in the context of ongoing change.

The themes conveyed by their mobilisations demonstrate an awareness that in the absence of equality and redistributive policies, the decade of economic growth that the continent has experienced has left the structural factors of marginalisation for many sections of society untouched and constitutes the breeding ground for other future upheavals.

The current repositioning phase of the citizen movements, however, also creates exciting prospects for new research, particularly on the scope and modalities for alternative modes of social and political intervention initiated by the collectives. This particularly involves the question of the democratic dividend and a revival in the municipalism initiated by actors from the citizen movements (SENS in Burkina Faso or the fragile trajectory of the municipality of Kaloum in Guinea). In their role as incubators that aim to generate a new political class, they offer potential responses to the disaffection of young people with mainstream political organisations.

On a global level, we can also look for ways of rethinking the remedies to the crisis of representative democracy, as witnessed by part of the population's approval for the latest coups d'état that took place in West Africa between 2021 and 2022.

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## Recommendations

### For the attention of UPEC actors

- ❖ Support the work of conceptual structuring and deepening the foundations and methodologies of peaceful democratic struggles, notably through the concerted training programme with partner think tanks/trainers, as well as exchanges with networks and spaces for citizen socialisation such as Afrikki and YADA;
- ❖ Connect citizens' initiatives with regional and sub-regional bodies, with a view to enhancing the citizen participation mechanisms advocated by the 2006 African Youth Charter.
- ❖ Promote rapprochement between the citizens' collectives and relevant institutional actors active on these collectives' themes of action, as a means to mobilise resources.

### ❖ To the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organisations

- ❖ Urge Member States to sign, ratify and integrate the recommendations on youth policies in the perspective defined by the African Youth Charter of 2006;
- ❖ Urge Member States to take the necessary steps to ensure the effective participation of young people and youth representative bodies in governance, as well as in the observation and monitoring of elections, by removing obstacles that limit the effective participation of young people;
- ❖ Encourage states to support and adequately fund the activities of citizens' collectives, especially those actively involved in implementing innovative governance monitoring solutions;
- ❖ Allocate a percentage of the community budget to activities that strengthen the capacity of youth representative bodies and citizen collectives in participatory management.

### For the Attention of the States

- ❖ Take the necessary steps to ensure the participation of youth in governance, as well as in the observation and monitoring of elections, as part of confidence-building measures with political bodies to integrate African youth into political and social life;
- ❖ Enable national youth coordinating councils to function freely and independently to serve as genuine training grounds for civic participation and youth leadership without undue political interference or influence;

### **For the attention of the Citizen Collectives**

- ❖ Allocate a percentage of the annual budget to activities that build the capacity of youth groups in participatory management.
- ❖ Familiarise themselves with the existing national and regional normative frameworks for youth civic engagement, in order to identify and establish avenues for institutional cooperation with these institutions to promote civic participation and the fight against the socio-political marginalisation of young people;
- ❖ Get closer to and strengthen strategic alliances with mainstream civil society organisations active in advocacy on issues of common interest (transparent governance, fight against corruption, defence of human rights, etc.) in order to strengthen the technical expertise of citizen movements and carry out concerted actions towards policy makers;
- ❖ Contribute to the updating of national youth policies in the light of new situations and challenges that hinder the effective participation of young people and citizen collectives in governance monitoring.

### **For the attention of the KPSRL Research Community**

Support research into the democratic dividend and municipal civic participation projects.

The current repositioning phase of the citizen movements creates exciting prospects for new supported research, particularly on alternative modes of social and political intervention at the local level, initiated by the citizen collectives. The theme of the “democratic dividend”, as well as that of the revival in municipalism, advocated by actors from citizen movements, constitute new stimulating fields of research.

- ❖ The theme of open governance at the local level, i.e. the municipality as a space for a new type of politics (defended by the *SENS* movement in Burkina Faso), reflects the desire of some of the actors from the citizen movements to act as incubators to creating a new political class.
- ❖ The revival of participatory municipalism appears to be one possible response to the crisis of representative democracy.
- ❖ The new associative dynamic of alliances of social forces without party membership could also be a response to the disaffection of young people with mainstream political organisations.