

Social media, popular revolt: cure against African dictators?

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The events and developments of the past six months in Africa have demonstrated that the rise of social media has not only revolutionised the business environment, but also redefined the political scene by shaking the foundation of dictatorship, lack of service delivery and corruption for the first time since the dawn of independences.

But, can social media alone perform miracles without the will of the people?

"Social media can spread the word, but without the determination and will of the population, the army's desire to get rid of the head of state and an international hostile environment, the prospects of North African-style revolution are extremely dim in Southern Africa, particularly in places such as Zimbabwe and Swaziland," former *City Press* editor Mathatha Tsedu said.

Tsedu is the director of the Media24 Journalism Academy in Johannesburg, and was a panellist at a media forum hosted recently in South Africa by CNN and MultiChoice.

Zimbabwe's day will come - Tsedu

In the case of Zimbabwe, he said the attitude of the army and police will be a serious determining factor because the hierarchies of these two forces are still holding on, to protect their interests, as they are still enriching themselves.

Nevertheless, he said the day will come when, despite the lack of the abovementioned conditions, people will stay in the streets amid police crackdown and things will change.

Ethar El-Katatney, an Egyptian award-winning journalist and blogger, said social media remains an incredible source and platform where communities discuss issues and make their voices heard.

However, she said without these communities' decision to fight social injustice, corruption and oppression, the revolution will never happen.

"Whether we live in North Africa, in Southern Africa or elsewhere on the continent, we all have the same grievances and we must be in charge and stand up for our rights," she urged.

Political commentator Moeletsi Mbeki said African leaders, who have been a burden on the continent and on their people

since the 1960s, are on the run from the people of Africa.

Since the dawn of African revolutions, which caught many power-mongering leaders off-guard, and challenged their corrupt and useless regimes, social networking sites Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and blogs have been hailed as critical technological tools capable of reshaping Africa's future and destiny.

Social media used to exploit ethnic divisions

But, in some parts of the continent the glory of social media has been overshadowed by unscrupulous people who use it to sow ethnic division and political and cultural intolerance, raising the prospect that the diversity of ethnicities might be an obstacle to the people's revolution.

Reports said in Kenya - a country of 44 ethnic groups - some people allegedly use social media to plot how their ethnic group can 'own' the country, while some tribes urge their counterparts to be alert as they feel 'threatened' by other tribes. African journalists have been urged by the forum's panellists to relentlessly expose these negative impacts of social media.

"Are we angry enough? No. Kenyans talk a lot, but don't walk the talk. Until we are tired of our leadership, social media remains mostly a public relations tool," said business reporter and blogger Terryanne Chebet.

Kadaria Ahmed, editor of Timbuktu Media in Nigeria, said despite the power of social media in her country, there is a peculiarity of culture and religion as personal interests, fuelled by the 'culture of hope' (one day it will be our time to eat), make it difficult to push a single agenda and constitute an obstacle to the people's revolution.

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Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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