Beyond Protest: Rethinking Civic Action for Sustainable Change in Africa

by **Akolade Oladipupo** *[April 2026]*

Protesting youth in downtown Nairobi during the #RejectFinanceBill2024 Protests in Kenya. © *Tony KARUMBA / AFP*

When the dust settles after a protest, what lingers is not always the change that was demanded, it is the conversation. The tweets, the op-eds, the heated exchanges on WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages, the anniversaries we commemorate. What does not linger as long, or with as much urgency, is the harder question: 'What now?'

In the last five years, Africa has been convulsed by a remarkable wave of civic unrest. From the flash-mob energy of Nigeria's #EndSARS protests in 2020, to Kenya's Gen Z-led storming of parliament in June 2024, to the #EndBadGovernance demonstrations that swept Nigeria in August 2024, young Africans have shown a breathtaking capacity for organised, leaderless, digitally driven mobilization. The streets have roared. Governments have flinched. Some have even backed down. And yet, the fundamental question—what comes after the roar?—remains frustratingly unanswered.

This article does not argue that protest is futile. Far from it. But it does argue, with some urgency, that protest alone is not transformation. And in a continent where the underlying grievances are structural, chronic, and deeply entrenched, the gap between mobilization and lasting change could not be more consequential.

The Powder Keg Was Always There

It would be dishonest to call the recent uproars in Africa surprising. The underlying tensions: inflation, unemployment, kleptocracy, insecurity, and democratic fatigue, are not new; they have been building for years across many African countries. When they finally erupted, they did so in the manner of a powder keg that has been quietly filling for years. A single spark: a finance bill in Kenya, a police unit in Nigeria, a disputed election in Senegal was all it took.

Consider the numbers. Across West Africa alone, an estimated **577 protests and demonstrations** took place in 2020.[1] Nigeria and Kenya, two of Africa's largest and most watched democracies, have experienced some of the most dramatic youth-led uprisings of this era. In Kenya, the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests in June 2024 resulted in at least 39 deaths and over 600 arbitrary detentions, according to the Kenya National Human Rights Commission.[2] In Nigeria, the removal of fuel subsidies and successive currency devaluations created *the toughest economic hardship in nearly three decades*, triggering the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests.[3]

Sixty percent of Africa's population is under the age of 25.[1] Africa's presidents, meanwhile, average 65 years of age.[4] The arithmetic of that disconnect is not incidental, it is a governance crisis in slow motion. A generation that has grown up with smartphones, global information, and a heightened awareness of its own rights, governed by a class that cannot, or will not, connect with its needs.

Meanwhile, the Afrobarometer survey data shows that nearly six out of ten young Africans believe their country is headed "in the wrong direction," and that 58% of citizens across 34 surveyed African countries felt that corruption increased in their country in the previous year.[1] These are not fleeting frustrations. They are the architecture of a crisis.

The Coup Belt and the Democracy Deficit

At the same time that protests have been lighting up the continent's streets, a parallel and in some ways more alarming story has been unfolding: the extraordinary return of military coups.

Since 2020, Africa has witnessed at least **ten successful coups**: Mali (2020 and 2021), Chad (2021), Sudan (2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Madagascar (2025), and Guinea-Bissau (2025). This clustering has given rise to what analysts now call the *"Coup Belt,"* a continuous chain of military-governed states stretching from the Atlantic coast to Central Africa.[5,6]

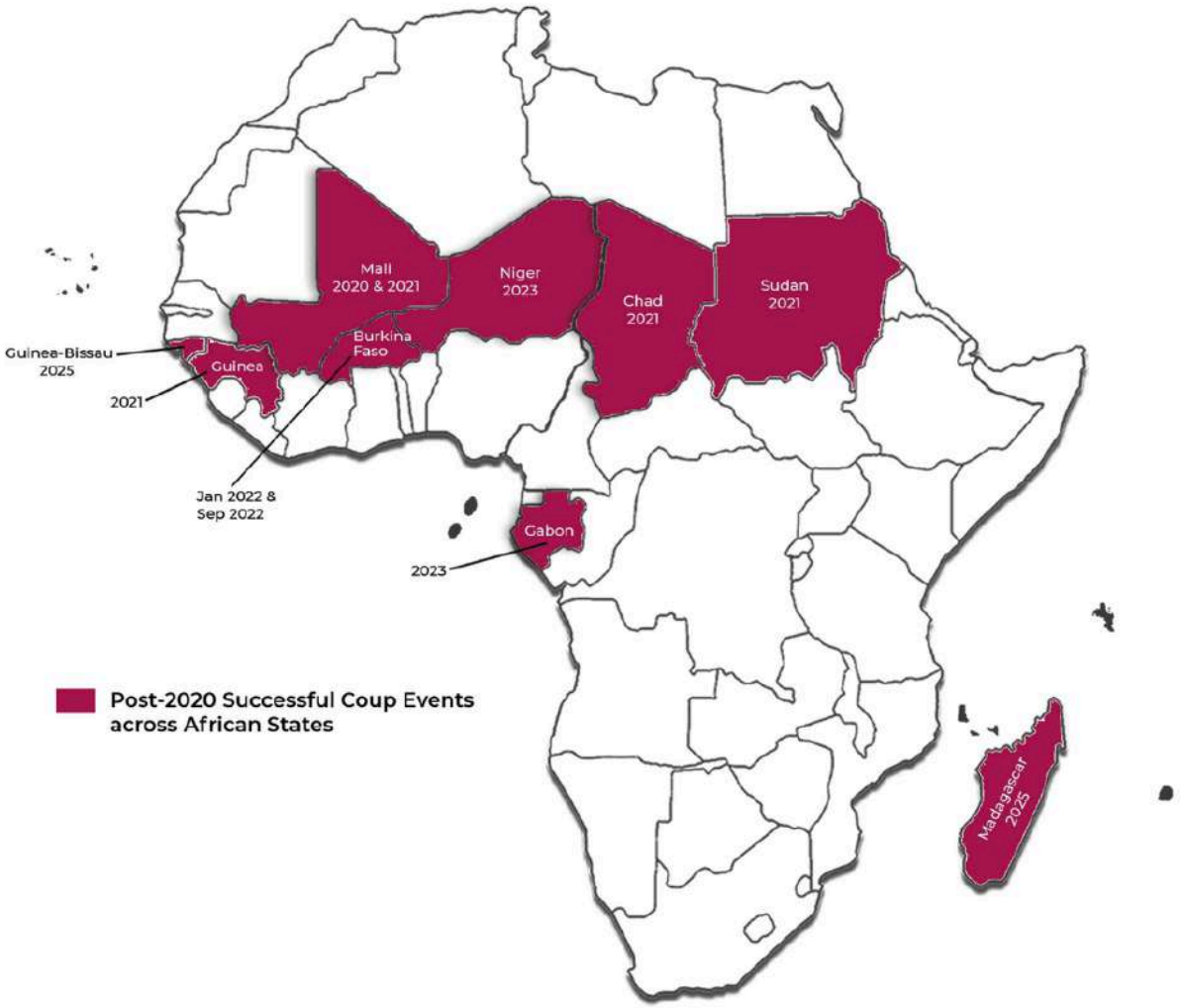
What is striking about these coups is not just their frequency, but their popular reception. In Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, coup leaders were met with public celebrations. Citizens, many of them young, took to the streets not to protest the military takeover, but to welcome it. The juntas framed their interventions in the language of anti-corruption, security restoration, and national sovereignty, and in doing so, struck a resonant chord.[7]

This is not an endorsement of coups. History is consistent on this point: military governance rarely produces the reforms it promises. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, elections have been indefinitely postponed and civic space severely curtailed. The Alliance of Sahel States, formed by the three Sahelian juntas after they exited ECOWAS, represents a deepening authoritarian consolidation, not a democratic reset.[8]

But the popular support for coups is a diagnostic tool. It tells us something critical: that **democracy, as currently practiced in much of Africa, has failed to**

[1] Najimdeen, H. A. (2024, August 7). The rise of youth protests in sub-Saharan Africa: Patterns and implications. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.
[2] Kenya National Commission on Human Rights. (2024, June 30). *Update on the status of human rights in Kenya during the anti-finance bill protests*.
[3] Waging Nonviolence. (2025, September 29). A year later, Africa's Gen Z uprising is only more emboldened.
[4] TRT Afrika. (2024, November 1). *African presidents: The average age of leadership explained* [Video].
[5] Wikipedia. (2025). Coup Belt.
[6] Channels Television. (2025, November 28). 10 coups in five years: African countries hit by military takeovers.
[7] Democracy in Africa. (2025, July 9). Coups in West Africa have five things in common: Knowing what they are is key to defending democracy.
[8] Vines, A. (2024, April 13). *Understanding Africa's coups. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*.

generate legitimacy in the eyes of the governed. When people applaud the barrel of a gun pointed at an elected president, they are not expressing a preference for militarism—they are expressing exhaustion with a democracy that has delivered neither security, nor prosperity, nor dignity.



African countries that have experienced coups (2020–2025).[9]

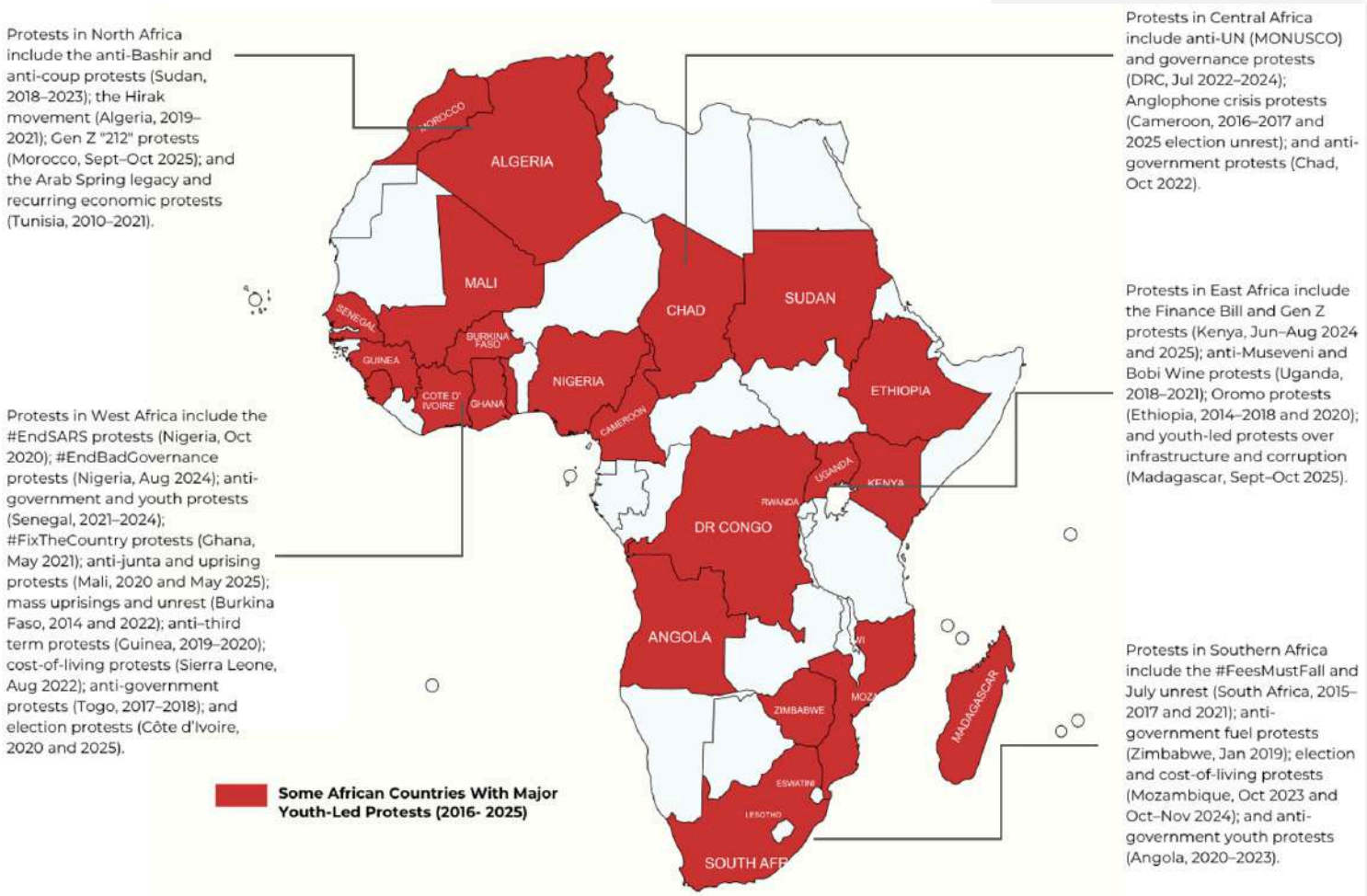
Protest Is Not Transformation

Let us be direct: protest matters. It is, as the scholar Zeynep Tufekci argued, a signal, a public demonstration of capacity and will.[10] #EndSARS in Nigeria demonstrated the remarkable organising ability of a leaderless generation. Kenya's Gen Z protests forced a government to withdraw a budget bill within days, a genuinely unprecedented outcome. Algeria's Hirak movement in 2019 forced a 20-year president from office. Sudan's protest movement in 2019 ended the 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir.

But even in these cases of remarkable street-level victories, the structural outcomes have been sobering. In Sudan, the military simply reconfigured itself and in 2021 staged another coup, eventually descending into a catastrophic civil war by 2023. In Nigeria, #EndSARS resulted in the disbanding of

[9] Adapted from Dersso, S. A., & Shewadeg, B. (2025, December 24). *Coup d'état continues to surge as the African Union and regional bodies inadvertently make coup-making profitable again.* Amani Africa.
[10] Tufekci, Z. (2017). Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest. Yale University Press.

SARS, on paper, but the underlying culture of police brutality, impunity, and poor governance persisted. The 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests produced no structural policy change, and 76 protesters, including children, were charged with treason.[11]



Major youth-led protests across African nations (2016–2025)

Schmiedl and Lioy, in their empirical investigation of protest patterns across Africa's five macro-regions, note that protesters across the continent tend to be younger, male, and more politically engaged, yet their findings reveal a paradox: those *"open to considering alternatives to democracy were more prone to protesting."*[12] This suggests that the protest wave is not simply a demand for better democracy, but an expression of profound disillusionment with governance itself.

The Institute for Security Studies put it plainly: "Austerity is a symptom of a broken politico-economic system that needs a reset rather than repair".[13] The danger is that protests, even successful ones, can produce surface-level concessions—a finance bill withdrawn here, a cabinet reshuffled there—without touching the architecture of the problem.

[11] Eboh, C. (2024, November 1). *Nigeria charges 76, including minors, with treason after August protests.* Reuters.
[12] Schmiedl, M., & Lioy, A. (2024). Patterns of protest in contemporary Africa: An empirical investigation of regional trends employing multiple imputation. Political Studies Review.
[13] ISS Africa. (2024, August 19). African protest politics — coincidence, correction or contagion? Institute for Security Studies.

Civic mobilization is genuinely hard. It is resource-intensive: it demands time, human capital, financial resources, coordination, and the fragile alignment of shared grievance across geography, ethnicity, and class. When it happens organically and spreads across regions or borders, as it did when Ugandan youth took inspiration from Kenyan protesters in July 2024, who in turn inspired Nigerians the following month—it is remarkable, because it cannot simply be architected from above.[14] That organic energy is precious. The question is: how is it sustained, and how is it channelled?

The Electoral Moment: 2026 and Beyond

The coming years represent a critical intersection of protest energy and electoral opportunity. In 2026 alone, **at least 11 African countries** are holding or have held elections, including Uganda (January), Ethiopia (June), South Sudan (December), the Gambia (December), Zambia, Benin, and others.[15] These are not routine events. Several of them will test whether the democratic disillusionment that fuels protests can be redirected into political participation.

In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni has held power since 1986, 40 years. In the Republic of the Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso has been in office for decades. In Ethiopia, the June 2026 elections will be the first since a devastating civil conflict in Tigray, and major opposition parties may boycott them.[16] Experts widely anticipate that many of these votes will be "tick-box exercises with largely predetermined outcomes," and that, if so, they could drive fresh youth-led protests.[16]

This is the moment where the protest generation must make a choice: will it engage the electoral arena, or continue to treat it with justified but ultimately self-defeating contempt? The answer, for millions of young Africans, is not simple. The cost of running for office in many African countries is prohibitively high. "Not-too-young-to-run" legislation, passed in Nigeria in 2018 and celebrated across the continent, has in practice been a form of tokenism, because structural barriers remain: campaign financing, party machinery, ethnic patronage networks, and outright intimidation.

And yet, the alternative, opting out of formal politics entirely, risks ceding the field to the very class that protests are aimed at displacing.

What Makes a State Work – and What Makes It Fail?

To understand what sustainable change would look like, it is useful to ask a basic question: what does a functioning state actually require? Political scientists broadly identify a few hallmarks: a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; an effective bureaucracy that can deliver services; rule of law that applies equally; responsive political institutions; and a social contract that generates citizen trust.[17,18]

By these standards, many African states are not simply failing—they are structurally incomplete. Institutions are hollowed out by patronage. The rule of law is selectively applied. Service delivery is chronically underfunded. And the social contract, the implicit bargain between citizen and state, has been violated so many times that trust has nearly evaporated.

Changing this is, inevitably, a long-term project. Sustainable change, the kind that rewires institutions, changes incentive structures, and builds new norms of governance, does not happen in the aftermath of a single protest or a single election cycle. South Korea's transformation from authoritarian poverty to democratic prosperity took decades of sustained civic and political pressure. Brazil's anti-corruption movement produced the conviction of a former president, but also a volatile political backlash. Even Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction, often cited as an African governance model, has required 30

[14] Al Jazeera. (2024, August 12). Is Africa experiencing a protest-led revolution? Al Jazeera.
[15] Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2026). Africa's 2026 elections: Navigating complexity to deliver for citizens.
[16] Foreign Policy. (2025, December 31). What to watch in Africa in 2026: Elections, conflicts, and more.
[17] Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty. Crown Publishers.
[18] Fukuyama, F. (2014). Political order and political decay: From the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

years of deliberate institution-building, at considerable cost to political pluralism.

This is not counsel for passivity. It is counsel for strategic patience, a quality that is admittedly hard to sustain when people are hungry today.

What Young People Can Do Differently

The honest answer to "what should young people do?" is: there is no single answer, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something. But there are choices that matter more than others.

►Run — even knowing the odds

Entry into formal politics at every level, local government, legislature, executive, matters. Not because all who run will win, but because aggregate presence shifts culture. The generation that organised #EndSARS without a single leader managed something that established political parties struggle to do. That organisational intelligence needs to be applied to the grinding, unglamorous work of ward-level politics, constituent engagement, and policy advocacy.

►Build institutions, not just movements

Movements are powerful but impermanent. Institutions: civic organisations, independent media, legal advocacy groups, trade unions, professional associations, are what convert protest energy into durable pressure. The legal firms in Kenya that mobilized to bail out arrested protesters, the doctors who treated the wounded, these were institutional responses that extended the reach and sustainability of a protest movement.[14] Building such infrastructure, funding it, protecting it from co-optation, and staffing it with capable people is as important as any street demonstration.

►Hold governments accountable in the mundane moments

The accountability deficit in many African governments is not only visible in dramatic crises. It is most consequential in ordinary moments: the budget that is passed without scrutiny, the contract awarded without tender, the appointment made without competence. Active citizenship: attending local government meetings, filing freedom of information requests, scrutinizing public accounts, supporting investigative journalism, is the infrastructure of democratic accountability. It does not trend on social media. It rarely goes viral. But it is the work that, over time, actually changes how power behaves.

►Use the ballot strategically

The next elections in Ethiopia, Zambia, Nigeria's state contests, and across the continent in 2026 and 2027 are not just procedural exercises. They are moments of leverage. Even in flawed electoral systems, voting strategically—supporting credible candidates, rejecting incumbents with demonstrable records of failure, refusing to sell votes for short-term patronage—is not naive. It is civic resistance in a different register.

What Thought Leaders and Society Must Do

The burden of sustainable change does not rest with young people alone. Those with platforms, resources, and access, including intellectuals, journalists, religious leaders, civil society organisations, and diaspora communities, carry distinct responsibilities.

Thought leaders must resist the temptation to be permanently oppositional without being constructive. Diagnosis without prescription is commentary; it is not leadership. Africa's public intellectual tradition is rich and brilliant, but it must increasingly engage with the granular: specific policy alternatives, coalition-building, governance innovation. The best of this tradition, from Chinua Achebe's moral clarity to Wole Soyinka's civic courage, and to the data-driven advocacy of organisations like Afrobarometer, offers a model worth emulating and scaling.

Civil society organisations must avoid two failure modes: co-optation by donor agendas and capture by political factions. The moment a civic organisation becomes the instrument of a political party, or begins

to tailor its advocacy to the preferences of its foreign funders, it forfeits its most valuable asset: its credibility as an independent voice. This is easier said than maintained, particularly in environments where funding is scarce and political pressure is intense.

And the diaspora, that vast, talented, financially significant community of Africans living abroad, must do more than send remittances. The Kenyan protests were amplified and financially supported in part by Kenyan diaspora communities using digital platforms. The Nigerian diaspora has historically been vocal but often disconnected from on-the-ground organising. Building genuine, sustained bridges between diaspora expertise, capital, and the civic movements of the home continent is a largely untapped opportunity.

The Long Game: Why Active Citizenship Is Worth It

There is a final, uncomfortable truth to confront. Active citizenship, the sustained, unglamorous, often unrewarded work of engaging with governance, demanding accountability, and building civic institutions, is a responsibility that may not yield returns within your lifetime. This is deeply unfair. It is also true.

The abolition of apartheid in South Africa required decades of sacrifice by people who did not live to see the result. The democratic transitions in Botswana, Mauritius, and Cape Verde, which are the continent's most stable democracies, were built on generations of civic norm-building that preceded any single political moment. Even Ghana's celebrated transition to multiparty democracy in 1992, which has produced peaceful transfers of power for over three decades, was rooted in civic investments made long before that year.

This is not a reason to despair. It is a reason to think generationally rather than electorally. The generation that organises today, which builds the institutions, trains the candidates, holds the governments accountable, refuses to sell its votes, and insists on the dignity of its citizenship, is planting trees under whose shade others will rest.

African youth have already shown something remarkable: they can move *without* traditional leadership structures; they can organise *across* ethnic and linguistic divisions; they can build *solidarity* across borders in real time. These are not small achievements. They are, in fact, the precise qualities that sustainable democratic change requires.

The question is whether that energy can be channelled from the spectacular to the structural. From the hashtag to the ballot. From the street to the institution. From the protest to the programme.

That is the harder work. It is also, ultimately, the only work that lasts.