From #Hashtags to the Streets: The Rising Tide of African Protests and the Quest for Leadership Accountability

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Abstract. Hashtag-driven protests, such as Nigeria's #EndBadGovernance, Kenya's #EndFinanceBill, and Uganda's #UgandaParliamentExhibition, signal a renewed continent-wide surge of civic activism. Youth formations, exemplified by Y'en a Marre, Balai Citoyen, and La Lucha, appear to herald an "African Spring," yet mass action in Africa is not novel. Between 1989 and 1994, thirty-five African states moved away from one-party system of politics and governance amid strikes against dictatorship and austerity. What distinguishes the current wave of protests is its viral amplification in which social-media networks rapidly convert grievance into global visibility while reducing engagement to theatrical, instinctive reactions. Drawing on recent Nigerian and Kenyan movements, this article contends that the celebrated "collective consciousness" is largely ephemeral, and that despite initial victories, hashtag uprisings rarely translate into durable institutional reform because they do not fundamentally re-educate culturally entrenched modes of leadership. True transformation, therefore, requires a "Revolution of Thought" that generates an uncompromising interrogation of the cultural transmission of bad governance that extends beyond coloniality discourses to challenge inherited political imaginaries. Without such an intellectual groundwork, protest movements merely replicate the unfulfilled promises of earlier revolutions, becoming fleeting spectacles rather than catalysts for accountable states. Therefore, while commendable for raising awareness, these protests are ultimately insufficient for fostering meaningful structural change unless they consciously re-educate instinctive emotional responses towards a more profound and strategic action.

Keywords: Revolution of thought, pseudo technique of humility, spaces of engagement, superficiality of engagement, cultural transmission

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Introduction

Recent protests in Nigeria under the hashtag, #EndBadGovernance, along with the #EndFinanceBill movement in Kenya and #UgandaParliamentExhibition in Uganda, all highlight what has been summed up as the increasing collective consciousness among citizens across Africa (Honwana, 2014; Chiamogu et al. 2021). This surge in popular protest movements is not isolated; it reflects a broader trend visible in countries such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, and Tunisia (Kiwuwa, 2019). A significant aspect of these protests is the central role played by youth movements, including Y'en a Marre (Fed Up) in Senegal, Balai Citoyen (The Civic Broom) in Burkina Faso, and La Lucha (The Struggle) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others (Toure, 2023). Over the past decade, these mass nonviolent uprisings in Africa have often resulted in the overthrow of dictatorships (Marks, 2019). Notably, Africa has seen the emergence of twenty-five new nonviolent mass movements, nearly twice the number in Asia, which has witnessed sixteen such movements (Marks, 2019).

These protests have led some analysts to describe the situation as an emerging "African Spring" (Lawal, 2024). However, the notion that the protests are indicative of an African Spring seems far-fetched. While there has been a noticeable spike in protests recently, Africa has a long history of mass street protests (Arnould & Vervaeke, 2016). Since gaining independence, political protests and economic strikes have been regular occurrences, often driven by discontent over one-party governance, dictatorships, worsening economic conditions, and the harsh austerity measures associated with structural adjustment programs (SAP) often imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on most African countries as a condition to grant them loans. While I do not, in any stretch of the imagination, attribute the democratic shifts across the continent to protest movements, the importance of their presence cannot go unacknowledged since they occurred frequently during the late 1980s and 1990s. It is noteworthy that during that period, between 1989 and 1994, thirty-five countries transitioned from one-party rule to multi-party elections, resulting in leadership changes in eighteen countries—an impressive feat that could be credited to protest movements, though I do not – compared to the absence of such changes prior to 1990, with the exceptions of South Africa and Mauritius (Arnould & Vervaeke, 2016).

Nevertheless, the recent protest movements, bolstered by social media, present a complex mix of hope – both positive and negative. They raise questions about the potential outcomes and implications for real change, particularly given Africa's long history of protest movements. Indeed, it is crucial to explore what these contemporary movements can achieve that previous protests could not, especially in terms of shifting the attitudes of African ruling elites who have

been delinquent in their governance. It is reasonable to question whether what is perceived as a conscious awakening is actually driven by the sheer number of individuals tweeting and blogging about these issues, thereby creating a theatricalized media presence that fuels rolling news coverage. Suffice it to say that while each perception and action can provoke significant responses from protest movements, these responses typically occur instinctively and rapidly, without conscious awareness.

To harness the full potential of these movements, it is essential to educate our instincts, emotions, and desires to act in ways that are genuinely valuable. The challenge lies in recognizing that our instinctive emotional responses were shaped by evolutionary processes suited to the circumstances of hunting and gathering – a stark contrast to the complexities of contemporary life. These protest movements must re-educate these instinctive responses to ensure they are appropriate and constructive in the context of demanding change in African leadership in the 21st century.

Thus, while these protests are commendable, I argue that they are ultimately insufficient for fostering meaningful change in Africa, in the sense that the protests can amount to instinctual reactions that fail to leverage the extensive intelligence and wisdom necessary for addressing deeper, systemic issues. Although the protests can mobilize significant public attention and create a sense of urgency, they potentially suffer from the "superficiality of engagement." Therefore, while they address specific, immediate concerns, they frequently lack a deeper understanding of, or sustained commitment to, the underlying causes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

For real change to occur in Africa, genuine transformation is required—a revolution that goes beyond mere government's superficial reactions to encompass a fundamental Revolution of Thought. This revolution must interrogate the very foundations of existence, challenging individuals' perceptions of themselves and their societies, as well as the cultural, political, and economic structures that shape prevailing structures. Such a transformation is essential to provoke accountability[1] among leaders, akin to at least, the respectable strata of Enlightenment thought, which the historian, Jonathan Israel, refers to as the "Radical Enlightenment." There is no doubt that critical scholars have long advocated for the revitalization of consciousness but often than not, they do so from the perspective of coloniality. However, the challenges confronting African societies, and their governance today, exceed beyond the mere malaise discourse of coloniality (Wa Thiong'o, 1998; Mignolo, 2007). Leadership in Africa does not exist in a cultural vacuum; it is deeply intertwined with the cultural foundations of its society. It is deeply rooted in prevailing modes of thought, which are culturally transmitted from one ineffective leader to another.

Consequently, Africa stands in need of a revolution in thought—one that is distinct yet outside the discourse of the decoloniality of the mind. However, I must emphasize that I do not seek to romanticize the notion of revolution, nor do I advocate for revolutions that lead to chaos and upheaval. However, I contend that a revolution is a necessary catalyst for political and economic changes. It is crucial for these protests to evolve beyond mere ephemeral events; they must be recognized as significant occurrences that deserve more than a fleeting mention in history. Without this transformation, we risk relegating these movements to the status of minor footnotes, rather than acknowledging their potential to shape the future.

In the following discussion, I examine the notion of the so-called growing consciousness, specifically in the context of protest movements in Nigeria and Kenya, and assess the extent to which this development enables protests within the broader struggle for systemic change. In doing so, I argue that this form of consciousness is often more ephemeral than substantive, ultimately failing to sustain the identity and momentum of protest waves over time. To illustrate this argument, I draw on recent hashtag-driven movements, such as #EndBadGovernance in Nigeria and #EndFinanceBill in Kenya, demonstrating how these protests, despite their digital reach and initial impact, struggle to translate into long-term structural transformation. I then expand the discussion by engaging with the theoretical concept of a revolution in thought, highlighting the urgent need to confront the entrenched structural problem of bad governance – a culture that has been historically inherited and perpetuated through successive administrations.

At this critical juncture, it is essential to address the cultural transmission of governance failures, which have been passed from one government to another, making it increasingly difficult for protest movements to achieve genuine transformation or exert meaningful influence on state power in both countries. Without a deeper intellectual and strategic foundation, protests risk remaining transient expressions of dissent rather than catalysts for lasting change. In addition, I will juxtapose the current situation of protests across Africa with the weaknesses and failures of past revolutions, such as those observed in France, as described by Marx (Marx, 1907). By drawing these comparisons, I aim to highlight the complexities and challenges that contemporary movements face in their quest for substantial change.

The Case of Kenya: The #EndFinanceBill Protests

Nigeria and Kenya are two nations that, apart from their shared experience of European colonial violence, differ significantly in political, historical, and

geographical contexts. But in recent times, both countries have exhibited striking similarities, particularly in their democratic structures – despite Nigeria operating as a presidential democracy and Kenya as a parliamentary democracy. They also share political landscapes marked by entrenched power structures, a legacy of corruption, and fragile institutional oversight. In addition, the protest movements in these countries are strikingly similar in composition, largely dominated by young people unified by both material and immaterial concerns.

Their grievances revolve around state repression, manifested through police brutality and, in some cases, military violence. Additionally, they demand accountable governance and an end to corruption while protesting economic hardship. These factors have triggered repeated waves of civic mobilization, where citizens strive to hold their leaders accountable. Consequently, recent waves of protests in Nigeria and Kenya serve as compelling case studies for re-evaluating the prevailing paradigm of protest movements across African states, particularly their effectiveness in achieving systemic change.

Kenya, in particular, has a long-standing history of political protest, dating back to the era of one-party rule and beyond (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). More recently, Kenya's Constitution has bolstered the right-to-protest movement, framing it as an inalienable right. Article 37 states, "Every person has the right, peaceably and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket, and to present petitions to public authorities" (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). However, this legal provision does not guaranteed freedom from repression. Successive governments have frequently criminalized demonstrations, deploying security forces – at times using live ammunition—to suppress dissent (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). However, because protests are constitutionally protected, they do act as a persistent thorn in the side of a government that refuses to heed popular demands and increasingly resorts to authoritarian tactics.

This dynamic was vividly illustrated during the 2024 protests against Kenya's controversial Finance Bill. Initially aimed at increasing government revenue and reducing external borrowing, the bill was widely perceived as exacerbating economic inequality and corruption, since it imposed taxes on essential goods such as bread, diapers, and smartphones (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, 2024; henceforth, ACLED). What began as opposition to the bill quickly evolved into a broader movement under the hashtag #EndFinanceBill (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024), culminating in mass demonstrations across Nairobi and other regions. A pivotal moment occurred on 25 June 2024, when demonstrators stormed the Parliament Building, forcing lawmakers into hiding and setting parts of the structure ablaze (Lawal, 2024).

The protests were organic and decentralized, which made them difficult to suppress but also rendered violence almost inevitable. Social media played a crucial role in mobilizing participants, with "Generation Z" leading the movement (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). The nonpartisan nature of the protests further broadened their appeal (ACLED, 2024), as demonstrators united against the government's proposed tax hikes (ACLED, 2024). President William Ruto responded by dismissing nearly his entire cabinet and announcing that he would not sign the Finance Bill (Lawal, 2024). He also initiated consultations to form a "broad-based government" and pledged to cut public spending and eliminate redundant state enterprises (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024). However, these concessions failed to quell the protests. Demonstrators continued to demand Ruto's resignation, linking him to the broader issue of systemic corruption.

Thus, the #EndFinanceBill protests did not arise in a vacuum, but rather the byproduct of the culmination of long-standing public frustration and alienation. While the movement momentarily forced the government to respond, it ultimately reflects a broader pattern of resistance shaped by government policies yet achieving only limited change. Ultimately, these protests underscore a recurring challenge in African political movements – they lack the catalyst for lasting reform and remain cyclical reactions to elite bargains, perpetuating the very structures they seek to dismantle. While the movement provoked immediate reactions, prompting President Ruto to implement certain changes, it also exposed contradictions in Ruto's leadership. As a presidential candidate, Ruto had positioned himself as a reformist, seemingly more receptive to dialogue with civil society than his predecessor. However, his failure to fulfil promises of reform led to anti-government contestation.

A clear example of this contradiction also was Ruto's campaign pledge to end police brutality and strengthen oversight. Yet, since assuming office in late 2022, and despite efforts by Kenyan prosecutors to address such issues (Blanchard, 2024), police abuses and extrajudicial killings (EJKs) have persisted. His inability to dismantle systemic police violence reflects a deeper structural issue. Ruto's administration not only sanctioned the use of excessive force against citizens but also defended police actions when confronted with accusations of atrocities, dismissing protesting youth as criminals guilty of treason (Blanchard, 2024). Further reinforcing this trend, Ruto deployed the Kenyan military into the streets of Nairobi, Kenya's capital, and across the country to suppress the anti-tax protest movement under the guise of restoring law and order (Shilaho & Monyae, 2024).

The #EndFinanceBill protest garnered significant attention due to its scale and symbolic weight, yet it fits within a broader trend of increasing demonstra-

tions across Kenya. From January 1st to September 15th, 2023, ACLED (2023) recorded over 840 demonstrations nationwide, with security forces intervening in 26% of cases – compared to only 15% in 2022. More alarmingly, police intervention has become increasingly lethal, as evidenced by opposition-led demonstrations organized by the Azimio la Umoja (Resolution for Unity) One Kenya Coalition Party, led by former Prime Minister and opposition leader, Raila Odinga. These protests resulted in at least 35 deaths (ACLED, 2023). The U.S. State Department's 2023 human rights report identifies security force abuses – including torture, unlawful killings, and enforced disappearances – as among Kenya's most pressing human rights violations. It highlights "numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings... particularly of anti-government demonstrators in protests that took place between March and July" (Blanchard, 2024, p. 8).

Of course, highlighting all these does not necessarily mean that protest movements' shortcomings do not generate impacts in certain ways. As Edalina Sanches (2022) argues, even when movements fail to achieve their immediate goals, they can generate significant transformations – particularly by reshaping participants' perceptions of their political role and agency. This shift in consciousness is particularly relevant in autocratic settings, where non-material sources of change can influence broader political dynamics. However, such victories are largely symbolic, as was the case with Kenya's #EndFinanceBill protest, and they rarely translate into substantive structural change.

The Kenyan government's response to the #EndFinanceBill protests exemplifies this pattern. Any concessions gained from the Ruto administration were short-lived, as evidenced by renewed protests in December 2024. Groups of young demonstrators marched through downtown Nairobi, staging sit-ins and holding placards denouncing abductions and illegal detentions – only to be met with police on horseback and clouds of tear gas (Lawal, 2024). The cyclical nature of protest movements in Kenya is not unique. Nigeria presents a similar case, with movements struggling to achieve sustained impact. Two prominent examples illustrate this dynamic: the #EndSARS movement against police brutality and the #EndBadGovernance protests. Though distinct, both reflect deep-seated public frustration and the persistent failure of movements to produce meaningful change.

Nigeria: The #EndBadGovernance and #EndSARS Movements

Similar to Kenya, Nigeria has witnessed persistent protest movements that reflect deep-seated public frustration. The #EndBadGovernance protests, which took place from 1–10 August 2024 (Uthman, 2024), were driven by widespread

economic hardship. Key grievances included drastic economic policies such as the removal of fuel subsidies, the devaluation of the local currency through unpegging, hyperinflation, and rising unemployment (Hassan et al., 2024; Ewang, 2024). Protesters united under the banner of #EndBadGovernance, blaming the government for their deteriorating economic conditions.

The movement united citizens across Nigeria, spanning multiple states and engaging various civil society organizations. It brought together a diverse coalition of activist groups and everyday Nigerians, including the Take It Back Movement, Nigerians Against Hunger, Initiative for Change, Human Rights Co-Advocacy for Change, Students for Change, and Youths Against Tyranny (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 8). At its core, the movement was driven by a shared sense of purposive action towards a common goal: addressing the severe material hardship that many blamed on the Nigerian President Bola Tinubu. Since assuming office in 2023, President Tinubu's administration had implemented a series of economic policies that led to widespread suffering, pushing millions to the brink of starvation.

A post by Olumide Adesina on X (formerly Twitter), one of the protest's participants, encapsulated the widespread sentiment behind the movement: "Hunger, not politics, mainly brought people out. High food inflation is no r especter of tribe, culture, or religion" (2024; Ihuoma, 2025, p. 94). Beyond immediate grievances over economic hardship, #EndBadGovernance also called for systemic reforms and greater government accountability (Hassan, Abalaka, and Ajiteru, 2024; Ihuoma, 2025). Despite government assurances to mitigate the crisis, the reality for most Nigerians remained dire (Amnesty International, 2024). Even when the government distributed food provisions, referred to as palliatives, corruption and mismanagement at different levels of governance – from federal to state, local government chairpersons, and councilors – meant that aid often failed to reach those who needed it most (Amnesty International, 2024).

Faced with worsening conditions, thousands, particularly unemployed youths who felt disenfranchised, mobilized both online and offline to amplify their demands for reform (Tella, 2024). However, as with past movements, the state swiftly deployed various tactics to suppress dissent. Traditional and religious leaders were co-opted, directly and indirectly, to discourage participation. Authorities also obtained several ex parte court orders to restrict access to protest venues, particularly in key urban centers such as Lagos and Abuja (Amnesty International, 2024). Although the protests proceeded, the state responded with severe repercussions.

Security agencies were pre-emptively deployed, roadblocks were erected, and protestors faced violence (Uthman, 2024). Despite warnings, many defied

the state's directives, both physically and through social media, only to be met with brutal crackdowns (Ihuoma, 2025). Protestors, and even bystanders, fell victim to arbitrary arrests by the police and operatives of the Department of State Services (DSS), Nigeria's secret police (Amnesty International, 2024). The violence peaked during which indiscriminate live ammunition was fired by security forces that led to approximately 30 fatalities nationwide (Uthman, 2024). These casualties, entirely preventable, underscored the government's heavy-handed approach to suppressing dissent.

Ultimately, the protests lost momentum, failing to achieve real policy changes or address the fundamental issues of economic hardship (Tella, 2024). The pattern repeated itself: initial enthusiasm, digital uproar, mass mobilization, and eventual dissipation, leaving underlying grievances unresolved. While a heightened sense of community consciousness emerged, as Ihuoma (2025) notes, social media activism primarily galvanized public awareness without securing tangible change. X functioned as a virtual town hall, where Nigerians at home and in the diaspora voiced their frustrations and coordinated offline protests under the banner of #EndBadGovernance. Yet, in the end, it amounted to a collective political motionlessness that failed to produce meaningful reform.

In some ways, the outcome aligns with Ake's observation that if one were to interpret such movements from his perspective, the commotion itself becomes the endpoint, and the failure to effect tangible change is secondary. However, I disagree with this view. While political consciousness and imagination were undeniably fostered (Branch and Mampilly, 2015, pp. 3–4), the effectiveness of protest movements must be judged by their capacity to produce lasting change. Without such impact, these movements become cyclical and paradoxical efforts of dialogues of frustration that ultimately lead to public apathy.

Though #EndBadGovernance attracted significant international and diaspora attention, which momentarily pressured the Nigerian government, it failed to secure policy changes that could alleviate economic suffering. As with previous protest movements, initial enthusiasm gave way to state suppression, and the protests lost momentum without achieving meaningful policy change (Tella, 2024). What emerged were transient concessions from the government, designed to placate protesters while arrests and casualties mounted in the background. The protest movement and the state's response followed a familiar script, one that continues to play out repeatedly in Nigeria's socio-political landscape.

In fact, the #EndBadGovernance follows as familiar pattern embodied in the #EndSARS movement which galvanized similar traction. Emerging in 2017, #EndSARS gained widespread attention in October 2020 after a viral video depicting police brutality circulated online. It quickly became a power-

ful platform for young Nigerians to voice their grievances against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit notorious for extrajudicial activities involving extortion, harassment, torture, unlawful arrests, and other human rights abuses (Ogundipe, 2017; Efenji, 2018). In response, the Nigerian government announced SARS's dissolution on 11 October 2020 and launched inquiries into police misconduct (Ayitogo, 2020; Eniayejuni, 2023). However, this action proved largely symbolic. Reports indicate that extrajudicial killings and police abuses persist, revealing the state's inability – or unwillingness – to implement real reform. The entrenched political culture of impunity ensures that structural issues remain unaddressed, exemplifying this deep-seated culture of impunity and lack of accountability.

At best, what is often shown as contrition in the face of the protest movement is nothing more than a demonstration of a "pseudo technique of humility." By "pseudo technique of humility" I mean the strategic display of contrived modesty and apparent responsiveness by the political leaders, designed to appease and disarm protest movements without enacting substantive systemic change. This is a technique that often involves rhetorical concessions, symbolic gestures, and performative acts of contrition that create the illusion of engagement while leaving the entrenched power structures and policies intact. It is an artifice aimed at neutralizing dissent rather than genuinely addressing the root causes of social and political grievances.

As is the case in Nigeria and Kenya, many African governments have perfected the use of this pseudo-technique of humility as a political survival mechanism. When faced with mass protests, strikes, or civil unrest, they often resort to tactics that feign concern, project a willingness to listen, and promise reforms that seldom materialize. This technique serves double duty: it dissipates immediate public anger while maintaining the status quo.

One of the main ways this technique is implemented is through rhetorical agreements that provide for the appointment of committees, task forces, and commissions of inquiry, exemplified by the Ruto government's "broad-based government" consultations and Nigeria's #EndSars, which often function as instruments of delay rather than vehicles of justice. These bodies provide the illusion of accountability, buy time and gradually sap the momentum of protest movements. The reports of these commissions are often shelved and their recommendations ignored or selectively implemented so as not to disrupt existing power dynamics.

A repeated cycle of events then manifests itself leading to the persistence of misconduct, such as those discussed in these cases from Kenya and Nigeria, which also illustrates and highlights the broader pattern of ineffective protest

movements across Africa. As explored by Sanches (2022) in Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa and Onodera (2025) in Citizenship Utopias in the Global South, many movements provoke temporary governmental reactions rather than enduring reform. A recurring cycle emerges in which mass demonstrations lead to ephemeral governmental pseudo-humility responses and followed by a return to the status quo. This pattern raises serious concerns about the efficacy of mass mobilization as a catalyst for structural change in these countries and why there is need for a paradigm shift. Therefore, the limitations of protest movements and governmental pseudo-reforms highlight the need for a Revolution of Thought as a means to achieve substantive governance transformation.

Theoretical Lens: Revolution of Thought and the Radical Enlightenment

The concept of a Revolution in Thought, as it is used in this context, refers to a fundamental and transformative shift in intellectual paradigms—one that not only challenges but also reconfigures deeply-entrenched socio-political frameworks. Such revolutions go beyond mere ideological evolution; they represent reconfiguration of modes of thinking, questioning, dismantling, and replacing the old with new perspectives that reshape governance, societal structures, and cultural norms. Hence, unlike incremental reforms that operate within existing governance structures, a revolution in thought necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of inherited institutional models, power dynamics, and ideological assumptions. Such revolutions transcend mere policy changes and instead alter the foundational principles underpinning governance, societal institutions, and public engagement. This kind of transformation is not a reactionary measure but a proactive intellectual and cultural shift that redefines governance and societal values at their core.

In post-colonial African states such as Nigeria and Kenya, governance remains deeply entrenched in colonial legacies that prioritize hierarchical administration, centralised power, and political patronage over participatory democracy and public accountability (Mamdani, 1996). These inherited structures have facilitated corruption, clientelism, and economic disparities, reinforcing a governance model that privileges elite consolidation of power while marginalizing ordinary citizens. The endurance of such governance patterns has rendered protest movements a necessary but insufficient tool for systemic transformation. Despite widespread mass mobilization efforts such as #EndBadGovernance in Nigeria and #EndFinanceBill in Kenya, these movements have struggled to achieve long-term structural reform due to state repression, strategic co-optation, and the absence of a comprehensive ideological reconfiguration of gover-

nance (Branch & Cheeseman, 2010). Without an intellectual paradigm shift, protest movements remain reactive rather than revolutionary.

The Enlightenment, particularly the current usage here that Jonathan Israel refers to as the Radical Enlightenment, provides a useful framework for analyzing the need for intellectual revolutions in governance. The Radical Enlightenment promoted concepts of secularism, democracy, freedom of thought, and the rejection of hierarchical and arbitrary authority. Unlike the moderate thinkers of the historical Age of Enlightenment who sought gradual reforms, radicals such as Baruch Spinoza and Denis Diderot advocated radical transformations in politics and governance, challenging the power structures embedded at their core (Israel, 2001).

Radical Enlightenment thinkers proposed that governance should be rooted in reason and universal principles of equality and justice, rather than inherited power structures that serve entrenched elites. Spinoza, for example, rejected the divine right of kings and advocated democratic governance that prioritizes individual freedom and rational decision-making (Nadler, 2011). This reflects governance problems in Nigeria and Kenya, where power remains concentrated in postcolonial political structures that prioritize elite interests over democratic accountability. Similarly, Diderot emphasized the role of knowledge and education in dismantling authoritarian regimes, a crucial idea for African nations where civic enlightenment and political education remain underdeveloped (Darnton, 1979). Without a well-informed citizenry, movements against corruption and bad governance struggle to transcend temporary protests and achieve sustainable systemic reform.

In applying the Radical Enlightenment to Nigeria and Kenya, the Revolution in Thought must fundamentally rethink governance structures by dismantling post-colonial systems that prioritize elite consolidation of power, clientelism, and rent-seeking behaviors. Such mode of thoughts stands in stark contrast to the inherited colonial governance frameworks in Nigeria and Kenya, where state institutions continue to operate within hierarchical and opaque structures. The post-colonial state, rather than dismantling these inherited power dynamics, has largely maintained them, reinforcing exclusionary political economies (Mamdani, 1996). The challenge, therefore, is not merely advocating for reform within existing systems but rather reimagining governance through a transformation of thought—one that aligns with the principles of intellectual emancipation of culture, society, and government institutions trapped in the cycles of inherited negative processes.

Arguably, it is the case that the system that produces leaders, for example in Nigeria and Kenya (of which the same could be said of many other African

states), has been soiled inherited governance frameworks designed to serve colonial administrators, structures that have since been appropriated by domestic elites to sustain economic and political dominance (Mamdani, 1996). This is evident in the bureaucratic inefficiencies, endemic corruption, and state violence that characterize both Nigeria and Kenya's governance models. The Revolutionary Thought model suggests that, rather than reforming these flawed systems from within, it is necessary to reimagine governance through an entirely new intellectual framework that prioritizes public interest over elite preservation.

A compelling example of how a revolution in thought can lead to substantive transformation is evident in the way the technological revolution—particularly the rise of social media—has fundamentally revolutionized protest movements. The viral nature of hashtags and the ability to transcend geographical barriers have revolutionized activism, enabling movements to coordinate with unprecedented speed and efficiency. This has significantly reduced the lag between the occurrence of events and public awareness, allowing protests to gain traction in real-time. This digital revolution has given rise to a new era of activism, facilitating the coordination of protest movements across vast distances.

Under the new climate of protest movement, the substantive transformation brought about by this revolution lies in its ability to reshape the nature of protest itself. While I allude to the revolutionization of digital activism by technology, this discussion does not necessarily address its effectiveness in driving institutional reform or altering government behavior, which is a separate issue. What is important is the profound impact of digital activism in redefining the landscape of resistance, organization, and public discourse.

From a theoretical standpoint, this development aligns with Michel Foucault's (1980) notion of power and resistance. Traditional forms of power – whether autocratic or democratic – are sustained through discourse and institutional mechanisms, which define what is deemed acceptable governance. However, the digital activism revolution, much like the Radical Enlightenment, disrupts these entrenched structures by creating alternative spaces where knowledge and power can be contested. In the case of #EndBadGovernance and #EndFinanceBill, digital platforms function as counter-public spheres that challenge the state's monopolization of discourse, offering a decentralized and democratic mode of engagement where authority can be scrutinized in real time (Habermas, 1989).

In this context, I advocate for a new framework of revolutionary thought, much like the way the revolutionization of digital activism has transformed protest movements. Just as digital activism has expanded the scope of resistance, a deeper intellectual shift is necessary to achieve substantive change – one that

transcends mere street protests, which, while powerful, remain incapable of dismantling entrenched ruling elites. Even within pseudo-democratic governance structures, where leaders remain unaccountable to their citizens, meaningful transformation demands a more sustained and strategic approach.

The future of governance reform in Nigeria and Kenya, therefore, hinges on the ability of these movements to maintain intellectual and political pressure beyond the immediate cycles of resistance. The revolution in thought – akin to the Radical Enlightenment – represents a crucial step towards transformative change. Societies must reject inherited power structures as immutable and instead cultivate a consciousness that challenges their legitimacy. Movements, such as #EndSARS in Nigeria and #EndFinanceBill in Kenya, have undoubtedly mobilized thousands against injustice. However, they have been systematically undermined by entrenched governance structures that resist substantive reform. These movements exemplify the paradox of protest movements in many post-colonial African states: they generate widespread activism, yet transient political consciousness, and, therefore, struggle to translate mobilization into structural change.

In addition, the fragmentation of protest movements makes it impossible to retain their cohesion beyond immediate grievances. For instance, as discussed above in the Nigeria's protest movements of #EndSARS and Kenya's #EndFinanceBill, while they successfully unified diverse segments of society, they lacked the means (and are unable) to develop a structured ideological foundation for long-term governance change. In fact, the absence of clear leadership and divergent interests among activists does mean that these movements inevitably end in fragmentation. As such, unlike historical revolutions that produced structured political alternatives (e.g., the French and American Revolutions), contemporary African protests frequently dissolve without creating enduring political organizations capable of institutionalizing change (Skocpol, 1979).

Numerous cases of protest movements as in Nigeria, for instance, tend to be around issues of specific injustices without articulating a radical vision for governance transformation. In which case, without an intellectual shift – akin to the Radical Enlightenment – the underlying governance structures remain unchallenged. The movements lack an embedded political education framework that can produce a sustained ideological challenge to the state. Consequently, they are vulnerable to co-optation, repression, or gradual dissipation. Effective governance transformation requires, not just mass mobilization, but a comprehensive epistemological rethinking of power, governance, and democracy (Mamdani, 1996).

These limitations observed of protest movements underscore the need for a Revolution in Thought, one that transcends episodic activism and instils a

systemic reconfiguration of governance principles. Without an intellectual revolution, movements will continue to risk being neutralized by the pseudo technique of humility of their governments to placate dissent without enacting meaningful reforms. To this end, a radical shift in governance thought is essential to converting civic unrest into substantive institutional transformation.

The Broader Context: Protest Movements and Structural Weaknesses

Tilly (1986, p. 392) is correct in stating that social movements challenge the state through public demonstrations and strikes, with the aim of forcing negotiations with authorities on behalf of constituents. However, this is only half the truth because the success of such efforts depends largely on the cultural context. In societies where governance is characterized by transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership, protests may align with societal expectations and achieve some degree of success. As the platform, FreeBalance (2020), aptly states, "culture plays an important role in the governance of an organization," highlighting the influence of governance culture on state behavior and the potential impact of protest movements.

Nigeria and Kenya, however, have inherited dominant colonial governance structures that inhibit effective participatory political cultures. Unlike the West, where democratic norms are deeply embedded, these inherited systems struggle to facilitate meaningful citizen engagement as a mechanism for change through protest. As a result, cultural change may be a more significant precursor to political transformation than protest movements alone. Indeed, the weaker a nation's institutional capacity to achieve modern political action, the greater the role of evolving societal values in legitimizing protest participation (Lee, 1992, p. 240).

Decades ago, Harry Eckstein analyzed how culture shapes state institutions and governance practices. He argued that a lack of congruence between political culture and institutional structures contributes to instability and democratic breakdown (Eckstein, 1961). In Nigeria and Kenya, this incongruence between present political culture and protest movements fosters cynicism, reinforcing conditions that fail to challenge elite political predispositions. Without addressing these cultural and structural impediments, protest movements risk remaining transient expressions of public discontent rather than vehicles for fundamental change.

Addressing systemic institutions requires more than merely mobilizing against entrenched power structures; it necessitates a fundamental shift in societal thought that redefines political relations between elites and citizens. Such a transformation demands a revolution in perspective to dismantle the deeply rooted systems that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Rather than relying solely on episodic demonstrations, a deeper intellectual transformation – one

informed by historical experiences of both failed and successful movements – is essential. Insights from Karl Marx's critique of revolutionary failures and the European Enlightenment's cultural and political evolution illustrate how sustainable change often emerges from ideological shifts rather than sporadic uprisings.

In addition, a radical evolution in thought is necessary to reshape social values and alter political orientations fundamentally. Transitional societies such as Nigeria and Kenya, entangled in dominant colonial systems and Western cultural influences, cannot expect seamless political systems that enable effective citizen participation and systemic reform without radically transforming the system. The challenges facing protest movements in these nations stem, in part, from the persistence of dominant colonial structures, which hinder the emergence of a political culture conducive to transformation. As Aie-Rie Lee (1992) argues, political orientations and behavior are embedded within broader social systems. Thus, societal values play a pivotal role in shaping both political engagement and institutional structures (Lee, 1992, p. 251).

A compelling case study that underscores the importance of cultural transformation is Lee's (1992, p. 251) analysis of South Korea's participatory political orientation. During the period of study, South Korea's entrenched Confucian cultural background, which prioritized hierarchy over individualism, posed significant obstacles to developing a participatory political system. Because cultural traditions reinforced authoritarian values, they inhibited the emergence of a more inclusive political culture. This historical parallel illustrates how, until value change occurs, the persistence of a negative cultural framework – such as the dominant colonial systems in Nigeria and Kenya – will continue to obstruct mass political mobilization and the attainment of modern, effective political action. Value transformation must precede and legitimize protest participation, providing individuals with a compelling rationale for their political engagement.

This discussion underscores the necessity of a paradigm shift – a revolution in thought – drawing lessons from past movements, both unsuccessful, as analyzed by Marx, and transformative, such as the European Enlightenment, which redefined cultural politics. For contemporary protest movements to achieve meaningful change, the concept of a revolution in thought – or Radical Enlightenment – becomes imperative, provoking new modes of critical reflection, or as Baron-Cohen (1989) describes, "thinking about thinking."

Until then, protest movements will likely continue to operate within structural constraints shaped not only by political institutions but also by dominant political discourses and cultural narratives (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 209; Sanches, 2022). The cultural context not only influences the visibility and resonance of

social issues but also determines the "legitimacy of certain actors, identities, and claims" (Giugni, 2011, p. 275; Sanches, 2022, p.9). In this context, echoing the point of view of Sheila Jasanoff in her contribution to Stilgoe et al. (2014), it is now more urgent than ever to revisit ideas about the public. Jasanoff's notion of public, although emerging from a different context, is particularly relevant to understanding institutional structures in Nigeria and Kenya.

This is important to the point that the concept of the public itself is a critical but separate matter—one that, though beyond the immediate scope of this discussion, remains central to the broader discourse on fostering a revolution of thought. The public is often understood as a governed population, categorized through bureaucratic, legal, and statistical measures (Miller, 2005). The state constructs its notion of the public through mechanisms such as census data, policy frameworks, and electoral systems, aiming to manage society through expertise, law, and institutional control. This reflects a top-down epistemology, where knowledge is produced by governmental authorities and experts to define public needs and interests (Jasanoff, 2005).

However, the notion of the public should not be mistaken for a pre-existing, homogeneous entity but rather understood as a fluid and constructed space shaped by "civic epistemologies" (Jasanoff, 2005). In other words, rather than perceiving the public as a static or homogeneous entity, it is imperative to critically evaluate its dynamic nature, shaped by cultural, political and epistemological factors. Jasanoff (2005) defines civic epistemologies as the culturally embedded processes through which societies evaluate and legitimize knowledge. These processes shape public perceptions, inform policymaking, and influence broader discussions on transformative change. In the context of a revolution of thought, recognizing civic epistemologies, therefore, is essential, as different publics validate knowledge in ways shaped by their unique historical, political, and social contexts.

Contemporary scholarship suggests that the public is, in fact, a construct that dynamically evolves in response to sociotechnical controversies and emergent knowledge systems (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009). The public sphere in Kenya and Nigeria, of course, may not align with Western conceptualizations, yet it remains a dynamic and contested space shaped by the interaction between state governance and civic epistemologies. Understanding these culturally specific modes of knowledge production and validation is crucial to producing meaningful sociopolitical change. More so because, genuine political transformation in Nigeria and Kenya requires more than protest movements reacting to systemic oppression. It demands a reconfiguration of societal values and a deep-rooted intellectual shift capable of challenging entrenched struc-

tures. Without such an ideological and cultural revolution, protest movements will continue to be ephemeral events, failing to translate mobilization into enduring political change.

The Need for a Revolution of Thought in African Leadership

Several hypotheses can be proposed to explain why protest movements in Nigeria and Kenya (and more broadly in African nations) frequently mobilize against their governments. These hypotheses have become deeply embedded in the political and social fabric of these nations. The dual-pathway model developed by Van Zomeren et al. (2004) has received considerable scholarly attention, positing that individuals participate in protests for two primary reasons: (i) emotion pathway (or affective pathway) is driven by group-based anger over collective injustices or moral outrage. This pathway highlights how perceptions of injustice fuel protest participation. In addition, (ii) efficacy pathway (instrumental pathway) which is based on perceived group efficacy, meaning individuals engage in collective action when they believe their group can effect change.

In this sense, the role of anger in protest participation has been extensively documented (Goodwin et al., 2001; Van Troost et al., 2018; Sabucedo et al., 2014; Bray et al., 2019). Arguably, other negative emotions – such as fear, disgust, and sadness – also influence mobilization (Ahmed et al., 2020; Benski, 2010; Landmann & Rohmann, 2020; Sanches & Lopes, 2022). Despite these emotional drivers, the pathway hypotheses are insufficient to addressing underlying structural and cultural problems in Nigeria and Kenya that perpetuate cycles of protest and discontent.

To accurately analyze these cultural factors, it is crucial to distinguish between different interpretations of culture to avoid misrepresentation. While movement-framing and cultural resonance play a vital role in the effectiveness of protests (Benford & Snow, 2000; Sanches, 2022), the cultural issue at hand extends beyond symbolic significance. Protest movements strategically employ cultural resources for legitimacy and mobilization, as seen in cultural approaches to framing (Benford, 1993; Gamson, 2004). However, the deeper issue pertains to the culture that shapes societal and political structures, influencing the behavior of the ruling elite.

A pertinent example of this can be drawn from above discussion of Lee's study of South Korea. In the case of Nigeria and Kenya, the focus on protest movements tends to center on expressions of group-based anger and collective grievances, while cultural influences on leadership and governance are often overlooked. As a result, culture is merely treated as a resource for resonance rather than a fundamental determinant of political behavior.

A critical re-evaluation of culture is necessary to address the leadership crisis in Nigeria, Kenya, and many other African nations. Revolution of thought offers a lens through which to reimagine cultural transformation. This shift is imperative because the post-colonial political landscape remains deeply shaped by inherited dominant colonial structures. These structures continue to define civic epistemologies and governance paradigms, perpetuating unaccountable leadership and weak institutions.

Addressing this accountability crisis requires more than superficial gestures or mere rhetoric attempts at reform. A deeply ingrained cultural problem cannot be resolved simply by protest movements alone, as institutional change requires more than performative demands for humility. In addition, the persistence of inherited colonial frameworks necessitates a profound cultural shift. The demands for cultural shifts in both countries under discussion are not merely calls for accountability; they also represent a recognition of, and a deliberate effort to dismantle, the historical forces that have shaped these nations' governance cultures. These shifts go beyond holding institutions and individuals responsible – they seek to challenge and transform the deeply embedded legacies, norms, and power structures that have historically influenced governance, thereby paving the way for more just and transparent political systems.

That said, these challenges cannot be understood in a cultural vacuum. A cultural vacuum, in this context, does not indicate the absence of cultural norms but rather the persistence of a governance culture that is detached from democratic accountability. The ruling elite in Nigeria and Kenya are not disconnected from cultural traditions; rather, they operate within inherited frameworks that sustain violence, corruption, and unresponsiveness to the public.

Hence, to reiterate, a Revolution of Thought is necessary – not merely a rhetorical decolonization of the mind, but a fundamental transformation of the cultural forces that sustain bad governance. This revolution must refine cultural values and reshape civic engagement with the state to create new avenues for political and social accountability. Addressing negative cultural transmission – the process by which detrimental beliefs, values, and norms are perpetuated across generations – is critical to dismantling entrenched colonial power structures.

Such negative cultural transmission occurs through socialization, education, and communication, shaping both individual identities and collective behaviors. While it fosters social cohesion, it can also entrench authoritarianism and inhibit critical thinking. For example, cultures that prioritize unquestioning loyalty to authority often produce leaders who value allegiance over accountability (Foucault, 1980). Sanches' (2022) examination of Eswatini's monarchical culture illustrates this phenomenon: where the monarchy is revered as a sacred

institution and perceived as a unifying force among the Swati people. Consequently, the King is never held accountable for missteps, while blame is deflected onto advisors (Sanches, 2022). This exemplifies a negative cultural framework since no figure, in the proposed concept of a revolution of thought, should be deemed beyond reproach.

Similarly, Nigeria and Kenya continue to function within inherited frameworks of negative cultural transmission. The persistent calls for change – often articulated through widespread protests across African nations – highlight the urgent need for a revolutionary shift towards fostering a new mindset that prioritizes government accountability and civic engagement. This transformation requires not only a commitment to change from the ruling elite but also active citizen participation in demanding and shaping governance that genuinely reflects public interests and aspirations. Ultimately, a revolution of thought is paramount in facilitating the emergence of accountable leadership. Without such a shift, the structural and cultural constraints that impede progress will persist, rendering protest movements ineffective in achieving a substantive, systemic change.

Conclusion

Evaluating protest movements in Nigeria and Kenya reveals their inherent limitations in driving substantive transformation or effecting a meaningful change. While these movements serve as powerful expressions of public dissent, they often struggle to achieve long-term structural reforms. It is, therefore, crucial to prioritize the cultural and intellectual foundations of societal change over protests that, in their focus on immediate demands, frequently neglect their deeper impact.

A compelling argument can be made that protest movements have become proceduralized, reducing their effectiveness in addressing the very issues they seek to challenge. As I argue in this paper, while protests can be commendable, Sanches (2022, p. 3) has described protest as an "open-ended conception of political change and transformation," one that has, paradoxically, turned into just another procedural process akin to democracy and globalization, as if further mechanisms were needed. I agree with Sanches (2022, p. 3) that protests are both products and catalysts of change, as they occasionally trigger micro-level changes. However, this is the extent to which I acknowledge their potential. In fact, many of these micro changes are short-lived, as governing elites often deploy techniques of pseudo-humility to neutralize such movements, preventing them from fundamentally transforming social and political structures.

Recent protest movements in Nigeria and Kenya, exemplified by trending hashtags and viral campaigns, illustrate this limitation. More often than not, protests are instinctual reactions rather than well-calibrated strategies rooted in sustained intellectual engagement. While they mobilize public attention and generate urgency, they frequently suffer from what Bennett & Segerberg (2013) call the "superficiality of engagement." These movements may address immediate concerns, but they often lack the depth and sustained commitment necessary to dismantle systemic injustices.

For genuine transformation to occur, a revolution in thought is required – one that transcends mere government reactions or performative humility. Such a revolution must interrogate the very foundations of existence, challenging individuals' perceptions of themselves and their societies while critically re-evaluating the cultural, political, and economic structures that sustain oppressive systems. True accountability demands more than momentary acts of resistance; it requires a fundamental shift in consciousness akin to the "Radical Enlightenment" framework described by the historian, Jonathan Israel.

Meaningful engagement must, therefore, center on the cultural conditions that fuel these protests. It is crucial to recognize that elites do not emerge in isolation; they are products of entrenched socio-political and historical legacies, including colonial continuities. Too often, when instances of democratic transition occur, they are hastily credited to protest movements while their deeper postcolonial and imperial contexts are overlooked. Consequently, such transformations remain reflexive rather than revolutionary, devoid of genuine agency.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of protest movements as mechanisms for change invites new considerations. The perpetual cycle of protests is not only costly – exposing participants to state violence – but also politically precarious. Expectations surrounding protest outcomes can be misguided, leading to increasing disenchantment when substantive reforms fail to materialize. As public dialogue becomes institutionalized, critical academics, policymakers, and practitioners engage in these discussions, yet their focus often prioritizes procedural efficiency over meaningful reflexivity and transformative change.

The protest movements examined in Nigeria and Kenya thus appear to yield limited results despite their prevalence. This is not to suggest that protests do not generate spaces of dissension or momentary disruption. However, these spaces can be easily co-opted by ruling elites, reducing their long-term impact. Any social intelligence generated through protest movements tends to be relevant only to the institutions that engage with them, rather than driving broad societal transformation. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a framework to assess and evaluate the spillover effects of protests, including their unintended consequences.

As Mati (2020) suggests in a different context, postcolonial African reform struggles are marked by a dialectic of resistance and containment. When governments initiate dialogue, it is often a technique of elicitation—creating managed spaces of engagement that preclude more radical, uninvited publics from expanding the discourse. Wynne (2011) highlights how such orchestrated engagements limit the potential for true reflexivity, a point reinforced by Sheila Jasanoff's critique of institutional responses that "hit the notes but miss the music" (Wynne, 2006; Stilgoe et al., 2014, p. 8).

Ultimately, sustainable change necessitates a revolution in thought —one that does not merely replicate past patterns but actively breaks from historical inefficiencies that continue to hinder progress. Transformative possibilities must extend beyond protest grievances, demanding a comprehensive reimagining of leadership, governance, and civic engagement. The absence of such a fundamental shift ensures that protest movements remain fleeting expressions of discontent—capable of highlighting urgent socio-political issues but ultimately falling short in effecting substantive, lasting change.

Note

1. Within the framework of its conceptual use, and drawing on Sheila Jasanoff's (2005) perspective, accountability can be broadly understood as the recognition and acceptance of responsibility for actions, outputs, decisions, and policies. Ensuring precise articulation, accountability encompasses not only the obligation to assume responsibility but also the expectation of justification and explanation. In this context, governance is intrinsically linked to the principles of answerability, culpability, and liability, reinforcing the notion that individuals or institutions must transparently justify their conduct and decision-making processes.

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