

Is Africa rising or flailing?

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[Toby Moorsom](#) [1]

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Firoze Manji has rightly argued that the desires for political change being expressed in North Africa and the Middle East are shared throughout the rest of the African continent. While the north has been in the spotlight in the international media, large demonstrations have seriously challenged governments in countries like Swaziland, Gabon, Cameroon, Djibouti, Senegal, Kenya, Burkina Faso and more. It would appear then that the Western media is largely ignoring those expressions in the countries south of the Sahara, in part because they do not seem to hold the same strategic importance on the geopolitical stage. Moreover, in the media-fuelled imaginations of those in the more affluent parts of the world, perceptions of southern portions of the continent continue to hold racist tones that differentiate them from the predominantly Muslim north.

It is true there are important similarities between the underlying causes of the struggles in sub-Saharan African countries and in those of North Africa – specifically Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. Yet there are also very important differences. My worry is that voluntarist attitudes toward the movements in countries south of the Sahara overestimate their potential to replicate the democratic movements there. Overstating the similarities within and between these societies can prevent us from understanding the rather different tasks that need to take place to support significant social change. These differences will ultimately determine the internationalist strategies of solidarity we take in trying to advance a movement against the absurdly unequal global dispensation of wealth and power, and how we position ourselves to address the catastrophic consequences global capitalism is causing to people, our planet and the health and prosperity of future generations – wherever they reside.

HOW THE COMPARISON FITS

Bringing attention to the struggles of those battling dictatorial regimes and living conditions in sub-Saharan Africa helps further highlight the fact these movements are not merely struggles for liberal democratic rights, as important as those are. In fact, the reason it has been so difficult to find the political basis of unity in most of these uprisings when they emerged in January is partly because they were, quite simply, responses to material deprivation. They are movements that arrive out of the desperation imposed upon people by more than 30 years of Friedman-inspired neoliberal economic policies. What they are beyond this varies.

Egypt, in spite of its historical particularities, has many economic similarities with the rest of Africa. Its massive trade deficit is perhaps the clearest measure of the neocolonial relationship it has been pushed into by the wealthy countries that politically dominate international financial institutions. In 2010, Egypt exported US\$23.5 billion, but imported US\$48.8 billion. It did this while paying growing loans to the rich countries. Its internal lending rate in 2010 averaged 11.8 per cent. For most farmers or small business it was closer to 20. Such a relationship cannot hold. Like many countries in Africa, Egyptians are buying consumer goods worth twice what they produce and paying back loans used in the 1960s to start businesses that are now being sold back to international corporations before they have even been paid for. The rich countries get to feel good about their Live Aid and MakePovertyHistory campaigns, but they are still taking more than is returned. In this way Egypt is typically 21st century 'African'.

The most recent World Bank trade brief published a year before the uprising in Egypt gave a glowing

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assessment of the Mubarak government's compliance with the World Bank's demands. It states, for example, that: 'The changes it implemented, such as eliminating minimum capital requirements, also led to Egypt being ranked as the ninth top reformer for 2008/09, after having been ranked the tenth top reformer the year before.' European and US leaders later tried to distance themselves from Egypt's domestic politics, suggesting the regime was not 'reforming' fast enough. Yet the obvious reality is that the Mubarak government was actually doing everything the US and EU told them to in economic terms. Internal assessments of its economic performance over the previous decade by the International Finance Corporation, World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) are quite sickening in light of what we now so clearly know about the experiences of the majority of people in the country who were suffering. If they complained or organised opposition, they would be tortured into submission in jails filled with political prisoners ([Inweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoelib.nsf/.../\\$file/egypt_cae.pdf](http://Inweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoelib.nsf/.../$file/egypt_cae.pdf)).

Like most other African countries, Egypt was also facing massive urbanisation and urban poverty resulting from neoliberal policies that sent rural economies into crisis by eliminating marketing systems and agricultural support. As Hichame Safieddine (<http://www.unionbook.org/profiles/blogs/the-bullet-hicham-safieddine> [2]) notes: 'In Egypt, close to 40 per cent of Egyptians are estimated to live under the poverty line. Uneven urban sprawl has left close to 9 million living in the slums of Cairo alone.' And the circumstances may be worse than available data reveals.

Research by Sarah Sabry (<http://eau.sagepub.com/content/22/2/523.full.pdf+html> [3]) suggests urban poverty rates in Cairo have been seriously underestimated, especially when one considers issues of housing, health, water and sanitation and the ways resources are differentially accessed, even within families. Egypt, like virtually every African country, spends more on debt servicing payments than it spends on healthcare. As with other African countries, the Egyptian government had no capacity to act on needs of the poor, if they gave a damn, because neoliberal 'development' allows for no planning. The market is supposed to address all these issues so the only role for politicians, according to the theory, is to remove all functions of the state – except for policing of course. So faced with the real challenges being experienced by so many millions, the only sovereignty the Mubarak regime had was its means of repression – which they managed to extend beyond the horrendous methods taught by US troops and CIA handbooks (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Army_and_CIA_interrogation_manuals: [4] http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2010/03/09/waterboarding_for_dummies: [5] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/08/AR2008030800304.html>) [6]

When Mubarak was thrown out, there was a large list of bills in process that were drafted to appease interests of the US and foreign capital (including more than 900 Canadian companies listed there). These were things like public-private partnerships and anti-inflationary measures. As a result of this sort of globalisation the Economist Intelligence Unit could note in 2010 that 'Egypt's exports have quadrupled to \$16 billion and overall trade is approaching \$60 billion. A modest but interesting American initiative, designed to encourage regional integration and known as "Qualifying Industrial Zones," has provided some help as well.' The 'Qualifying Industrial Zones' referred to are in fact the places where resistance first emerged as people fought to create unions not under the grip of the state. They were created to bypass unions and yet ironically helped establish peoples breaking point of what kind of indignity they were willing to accept.

The fact that Egypt was being praised as an economic success in the months before Mubarak's departure reveals how thoroughly out of touch leadership and institutions of the Washington Consensus are with realities of the majority of the world. It also reveals the utter bankruptcy of the ideology so fervently pursued in the interests of a class of global billionaires.

This is not hugely different than the experiences in other parts of the continent. Uganda, for example, has been a special client of the US and the World Bank. Since the early 1990s the US were quickly able to cosy up to the once-Marxist rebel who overthrew the brutal and incomplicant regime of Milton Obote and Idi Amin. Ethiopia too does the United States's dirty work in Somalia. Meanwhile, virtually every other African country has seen levels of inequality grow while local production declines and more imports flood their markets. Foreign companies (often South African) buy their communications systems, mines, seed companies, millers, clothing manufacturers, soap producers

and anything else imaginable. This is neocolonialism par excellence.

YET THEY DIFFER: THE NORTH HAS BEEN A STRONGER ANTI-COLONIAL FORCE

It is also true that the history of North Africa cannot be separated from that of the rest of the continent. Ancient Egyptian and Nubian Empires were intimately linked to the histories of Bantu peoples further South. The Islamic empire was also rooted in Africa while a highly decentralised relationship existed with the Maghreb, in which local variants of Sufi Islam have taken syncretic forms within pre-existing religious thought. A number of significant empires such as the Malian, Songhay and Ghanaian also linked people across the Sahara for many centuries before Europeans were able to gain any strategic strength over the territory. For these and other reasons Illeni Centime Zeleke is correct in suggesting we more carefully scrutinise the ways terms like 'Arab' and 'African' are mobilised in news reports and popular discourse (<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/71735> [7]).

While North African history is intimately tied with sub-Saharan societies, there are also significant divergences. Most importantly, Islam served to provide societies in the north a number of protections against the slave trade and colonialism. Longstanding connections to the rest of the Islamic world also enable them to maintain systems of education that would be torn apart in the majority of societies further south throughout the colonial experience. Additionally, the southern and eastern portions of the continent saw massive movements of their populations in the centuries before independence. This was the case for a variety of reasons. The continent saw a realignment of power away from Eastern-based trade via the Islamic empires (roughly defined), toward an Atlantic world, which simultaneously extracted huge portions of labour, setting off new dynamics of warfare. Incursions from the south aligned with internal dynamics to cause a series of migrations and wars that advanced upward as far as the Congo Basin.

Meanwhile, for reasons not entirely understood, there were exodus from kingdoms in areas of present-day Angola and the DRC (democratic Republic of Congo), whilst the Portuguese began hammering the eastern Islamic cities (that did not have in-land Islamic societies to protect them). These dynamic populations were then fixed into colonial administrative apparatuses that gave life to new notions of ethnicity while simultaneously severing old forms of cooperation between peoples and destroying pre-existing systems of production and accumulation. Concurrently, a racial project increasingly constructed differences among people that were not previously very significant in determining relationships between the North and South of the Sahara. These processes contributed to the creation of significant differences between contemporary societies of varying parts of Africa.

The point is not that the north was completely immune from these patterns but, with variation among them, northern societies nevertheless fared much better than those in the south. There are a number of consequences of this. First, it was generally very difficult for significant settler populations to establish themselves. Secondly, racial projects were not as successful in establishing a deep sense of inferiority among Africans in the North, the West and the Horn, relative to Europeans. It also meant that local merchant classes (often directly aligned with religious authority) maintained significant levels of power originally accumulated through trans-Saharan trade. These classes compelled colonial forces to broker with them - to some degree as the colonists did with 'chiefs' further south. In these ways, the experiences with Islam were very different than places in the south where Christian evangelical projects were so powerful in defining the terms of public life. Partly for these reasons, North African countries managed to also make greater gains in developing industrialised economies with a corresponding industrial working class. To some degree this was, of course, a factor of simply being closer to Europe, with France and, to a lesser extent Italy, integrating administration of occupations directly into their national state structure, alongside attempts of cultural unification.

In Egypt, unions were largely tamed by state control from above, bringing the unions into the arsenal of labour discipline with the Egyptian Trade Union Federation. Yet since as early as 1990, the state labour regime slowly began eroding as workers looked elsewhere for protection. This was certainly evident in the formation of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS). They also started building independent trade unions and participated in hundreds of illegal strikes, leading to the formation of independent trade unions and, eventually, the establishment of an independent

Is Africa rising or flailing?

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trade union federation. This process was rooted in the civil service as much as in the industrial unions, and the pressure has continued to grow in the post-Tahrir days. See, for example, <http://www.egyptworkersolidarity.org/> [8] and <http://www.socialistalternative.org/news/article11.php?id=1521> [9]

NEOLIBERALISM RESTED ON AN EGYPTIAN AXIS

Since World War II the most significant differences between sub-Saharan Africa and the north – especially Egypt – have been geopolitical. British government documents show that plans for colonial withdrawal were intimately tied to the creation of Israel, which has in turn allowed Israeli settlers to continually push far beyond the needs of the true metropolises – which were Anglo-American. This was a counter-revolutionary base before independence was even granted. Egypt, until Anwar Sadat, was a frontline in a much larger battle against the ‘Third World’, as Vijay Prashad defines it. It is this battle that ultimately threw back any progress that was made in achieving greater equality in the post-colonial era (as imperfect and short-lived as that was). It also, however, coincided with the solidification of an intense puppet regime with Mubarak. In order for him to implement policy that was against the interests of the overwhelming majority in the Arab world, his regime had to be dictatorial. The battle in Egypt is not only against the economic programme of neoliberalism, but that programme is so obviously centred on an absolutely vulgar project of ongoing occupation. This is why the US did not give up on him as easily as they would have with any other tin-pot dictator.

In fact, up until January of 2011 the position of the US and the EU was that the northern countries needed to be held down by dictators of the good kind, while support for those despots further south has been more fickle. It was the US, Israel and their other client, Saudi Arabia, who required the dictatorial rule to maintain their grip on the gates of the Palestinian prison in Gaza and the Suez. This dictatorship did not, however, manage to break down all aspects of Nasser's anti/post-colonial state, which included significant advancement in levels of education. Thus, Mubarak found himself implementing neoliberal policies that cut the number of jobs available as a demographic glut of educated students entered working age.

THE SOUTH SUFFERS DIFFERENTLY AND RESPONDS DIFFERENTLY

Although it is politically unpopular to divide the continent of Africa, in this analysis, there are important reasons to do so. Since the financial crisis of 2008 there has been ongoing speculation in commodities, including the rise in futures markets for staple foods, which has coincided with processes of ‘land-grabbing’ and further social dislocation of the poorest in Africa. This has been met with a surge of protest movements in sub-Saharan countries that bears some resemblance to those taking place in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. The increases in food prices are of course just one component – the last in a series of attacks against the poor over the last 20 years or more: education and healthcare have been gutted, basic infrastructure is crumbling, unions have been smashed, wages are down, transport costs continually rise while people are forced to travel in despicably unsafe vehicles that take them home to intermittent electricity and water services they nevertheless pay ever-larger portions of their income for.

The conditions of the majority in sub-Saharan Africa unfortunately render them politically volatile. Varying theories in social sciences have tried to codify the resulting political structures; ‘politics of the belly’, ‘politics of spoils’, ‘prebendalism’ and the like. They all are attempting to codify forms of semi-feudal arrangements in which labour and the necessities of life are not completely commodified. Labour and life are of course not completely commodified in any part of the world. Everywhere, capitalism is built upon pre-existing systems of oppression even as it smashes the bonds between humans and nature, humans and each other, in creating the wage relation. These pre-existing systems of oppression – these ‘traditions’ – are reinvented as capitalism expands ever outward into new places. However, in many parts of Africa, so few manage to actually break into the wage relationship. As a result ‘non-capitalist’ relations tend to be more intense than in the centres of capitalist accumulation.

In current-day Uganda, where demonstrators increasingly challenge the US-supported petty dictatorship of Yoweri Museveni, it is estimated that 80 per cent of youth are unemployed (Africa Report, no. 29, April 2011). Official unemployment rates in most of Africa are of course notoriously

Is Africa rising or flailing?

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difficult to establish, if there are even attempts to collect them. Yet World Bank statistics show that in Chad, 94 per cent of those employed can be described as being in 'vulnerable employment, unpaid family or own account employment'. In Senegal it is 84 per cent. Zambia, which benefits from a large mining sector, comes in at 65 per cent.

Then there are the dramatic differences in quality of life and public health indicators. According to those established in the Millennium Development Goals, only 5 per cent of people in Benin and Niger have access to 'improved sanitation services'. It is 4 per cent in Ethiopia (although Britain's Johnny Walker just acquired one of its main breweries. They may not have clean water; they can at least have beer!). 9 per cent in the Congo and Burundi have 'improved sanitation'. In Chad, sadly, it is only 3 per cent. According to World Bank statistics, Chad has to be about one of the worst places in the world to live - if one actually wants to stay alive. The only places with worse overall crude death rates are the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau (with its drug-smuggling port of Europe-bound cocaine) and Afghanistan. In comparison, 59 per cent of Peruvians and 81 per cent of Guatemalans enjoy these basic necessities. For Chadians, therefore, working as a mercenary for Gaddafi was a reasonable option. In Botswana, which was so recently billed as a 'miracle' economy thanks to its mining industry, almost 25 per cent have HIV.

This is, unfortunately, not Africa rising, it is Africa flailing. Africa is flailing amidst the repercussions of neoliberal economic policies and a resulting process of accumulation through dispossession. The inequalities emerging in African countries are as or more staggering than they are in all other parts of the world subjected to neoliberal economic policies. The difference is that Africans barely extracted any of the benefits of capitalism, in the ways that working class people in other parts of the world were able to. They received at most a decade and a half of post-independence in which they could go on a spending spree and build the infrastructure their societies had been systematically deprived of through the colonial years. Some, such as South Africa, never had that opportunity as neoliberalism was brought in simultaneously with the end of apartheid and formal independence.

The new elite in sub-Saharan Africa is extremely brazen in their conspicuous consumption, but the more difficult question to answer is whether they will actually have any capacity to make investments in industries that could absorb some of the extraordinary levels of the unemployed. So far it does not seem to be the case as wealth tends to be coming from those who have quickly gotten into cell-phone communications - supporting technologies manufactured elsewhere - and luxury hotels and transport, while most other industries are being increasingly dominated by external players. As Patrick Bond has repeatedly noted, their productive capacities are proving to be as pathetic as Fanon predicted they would be. Many members of this new elite are often former activists from the independence struggle. Today they make a mockery of the struggle as they sport the latest models of luxury cars with the spoils of contracts for state services, their investments in mining companies in Zimbabwe and their seats on corporate boards of directors.

The unemployed, on the other hand, are both illiterate and globally aware - they see displays of the wealth emanating from other parts of the world and quite rightfully desire some of it. Yet almost all of them have been victim of multiple tragedies. Many have lost parents, siblings, extended family and friends to HIV, where it has been prevalent (yet where it is not, malaria, dysentery and innumerable treatable diseases do nearly as well). Those now at a working age were the first victims of cuts in education, who lost out when fees were suddenly introduced for school systems that were incapable of maintaining standards. Universities were bled dry, hospitals, clinics, veterinary care and marketing systems were dismantled and food subsidies eliminated, some water and electricity services have been partially privatised, but most systems are still floundering because of the enormous investments needed to simply revive what already exists. Meanwhile, peri-urban slums continue to be built in flood zones and areas without basic sanitation, let alone clean water.

In this context, poor people participate in some of the most unpleasant political processes. They have not built an analysis of the global economy through processes of battling employers and the state in the way that many Egyptian workers have. Al Jazeera coverage has praised Senegal's 'Y En A Marre' ('Enough!') movement, but nobody talks about the fact that when they demonstrate, large demonstrations also take place in support of the hideously kleptocratic ruling party. Things are not quite as they are reported in the Tehran Times

Is Africa rising or flailing?

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(<http://www.tehrantimes.com/index.php/world/721-senegals-wade-stages-mass...> [10]), but pro-Wade rallies in early 2011 did pull out thousands while comparable numbers demonstrated for Y En A Marre. Those at rallies in support of the ruling party are not simply Wade's stooges, like those who attempted to break into Tahrir Square numerous times with vicious force but were repelled by heroic rock-throwing youth.

In Senegal, as in Zambia and many other parts of the continent, the poorest demonstrate in support of the ruling parties as often as they demonstrate against them. This is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained in simple, jargonistic political science terms, but it often has very nasty consequences. These are, for example, the homophobes in Malawi. In Zambia, grassroots politics most often amount to party 'cadres' (unemployed youth) beating each other up and at times terrorising local members of the community. Newspapers weekly have images of people whose faces have been bloodied in ridiculous battles as the poor fight about insults made toward their respective leaders. Their leaders, such as Michael Sata of Zambia's Patriotic Front, mobilise homophobic, misogynist and xenophobic nationalisms that make mockeries of history and invoke religious fundamentalisms fuelled by US-funded evangelical church doctrine. The fear, of course, is that in some instances these forms of politics meet up with voting blocks that correspond to territorial claims of ethnicity. In Kenya, in 2008, this resulted in poor people killing each other as the country divided for their presidential candidates. This kind of mobilisation is so much easier and more rapid than the great work the Bunge La Mwananchi movement undertakes, pulling out smaller numbers to a cause that is much more capable of halting ongoing colonialism.

These comprador leaders join the World Bank and international NGOs in appropriating the language of the left. This language was once used in former liberation struggles but today it is utterly disconnected from their original meanings. Lay people can wax on about 'empowerment' and 'gender' without being able to actually contextualise it in relation to structures of political and economic power. The BMW-driving wives of politicians head up women's organisations while invoking the most vacuous feminist politics that simply ask citizens for votes for women. Five African countries actually have more women in government than Canada – Rwanda, Angola, Burundi, Uganda and South Africa – and yet it has not altered neocolonial relations. Rather than focusing on the tyranny of debt-servicing relationships, Africans have picked up on the distracting and undemocratic language of 'governance' pushed on them by the IFIs. Such language doesn't even function within the narrow confines it was intended for, in part because it conflicts with the ideology of neoliberalism.

Carlos Oya at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) has been undertaking research on civil service reform that reveals a variety of new means of fleecing the public within the frameworks provided by the IMF, World Bank and other donors. The language of privatisation, outsourcing and public-private partnerships has enabled civil servants to set up consultancies and companies that run parallel to government, receiving outsourcing contracts for inflated prices. It is a new version of the very same thing that the neoliberals disliked about former parastatal enterprises – graft, but it has simply been given a new name.

Ultimately, Firoze Manji is correct to say that 'there is, in effect, a bankruptcy of ideas' on how to move forward in struggles against neoliberalism in Africa. There is not only a bankruptcy of ideas, but the social forces do not seem to be there to fight for them. In the first anti-colonial struggles key intellectuals shunned material prosperity within the colonial economy and took on the slow task of anti-colonial popular education. They rode bicycles between villages and stayed in the houses of the poor. In the best instances they developed organic connections with the struggles of the poorest while promoting a politics of self-emancipation in the manner promoted by people like Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral. Spontaneity and mass action played a vital role in many instances, but there was also a political philosophy – however imperfect – to tap into. Today few intellectuals of this sort exist. Committed academics are absorbed in trying to keep universities functioning while others spend their time doing work for international organisations and NGOs. Others have left to work in the US, Europe and elsewhere – often with the reasonable desire to support their families on the continent. Regardless of the motivations, the result is that the educated classes have largely abandoned the struggles for independence and social justice.

For these reasons, if social forces in much of Africa are going to fight for a better world they will

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absolutely have to link up with those struggles elsewhere – and especially those in Egypt and Tunisia. Not only do Egyptian activists need to continue to fight internally, they will have to develop an internationalism that looks south. The recent massacres of dark-skinned people by Libyan rebels show how disastrous anti-African sentiment by lighter skinned 'Arabs' can be. African social movements like Kenya's Bunge la Mwananchi will also have to navigate the competing demands of continuing their impressive grassroots activism in challenging circumstances under principles of self-reliance while also finding ways to link up with international struggles that can find ways of supporting them without undermining their autonomy. The point is, we cannot expect the same kind of dramatic surges in the south anytime soon. Unfortunately, it will take a lot more work and a lot more thinking about how to build a new and potent internationalism. (See Kimari and Rasmussen's excellent piece here: <http://www2.carleton.ca/africanstudies/research/nokoko/volume-1/>) [11]

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Categories: [Features](#) [14]

Issue Number: [547](#) [15]

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =  
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";  
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); })(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk');
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Article-Summary:

In the wake of sustained social unrest in many parts of Africa this year, Toby Moorsom considers the extent to which the continent might be said to be 'rising or flailing'. In the wake of sustained social unrest in many parts of Africa this year, Toby Moorsom considers the extent to which the continent might be said to be 'rising or flailing'.

Category: [Governance](#) [16]

Oldurl: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category.php/features/76251> [17]

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[11] <http://www2.carleton.ca/africanstudies/research/nokoko/volume-1/>

[12] <https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/africa-rising-or-flailing>

[13] <http://www.pambazuka.org/>

[14] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3272>

[15] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/7512>

[16] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3274>

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