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Research Project

Explosive youth: Political protests in Conakry and Kampala

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Project title Explosive youth: Political protests in Conakry and Kampala

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The magnitude of recent youth-led movements and upheavals in urban Africa begs inquiry into common patterns across cities. This doctoral research compares Conakry (Guinea) and Kampala (Uganda) to develop a theory why certain categories of youth engage in protests more than others, and why protests tend to be concentrated in specific urban areas.

0.0.1 Background

Across the world, youth seem to translate their socioeconomic precariousness into political instability. Numerous subSaharan African cities have recently become the sites of political riots, demonstrations, upheavals and other forms of political contestation. Despite their diversity, they also exhibit numerous similarities. The instrumentalization of the urban youth's rage by political actors, for example, is as widespread as the concentration of protests in areas with a specific sociopolitical history (rather than a particular socioeconomic makeup). In Conakry, for instance, youth gangs have staged protests on a regular basis in an area that has been the contested centre of ethnicpolitical conflicts over urban landownership. In Kampala, youth collectives have organized and incited recent opposition protests at a downtown market for car spare parts.

0.0.2 Approach

Since most youth in African cities remain outside of political processes, the question is: who are the ones who force their way into contentious politics? Contrary to the prevalent analyses of national demographics and poverty, I argue that the central factors for young people to engage in overt political contestation are far more nuanced. They concern historical developments of specific youth groups and categories in the city, their neighbourhood context with its particular history, and the political networks that they are entangled in. The comparative method, applied to different cities as well as different neighbourhoods, enables a systematic analysis of these aspects.

0.0.3 Relevance

SubSaharan Africa is the world's fastesturbanizing region, and the only one where the percentage of youth continues to rise drastically. To sharpen our understanding and possibilities of addressing urban youth and conflicts, the details of contestation need to be analysed, with an emphasis on the fact that protests are not only an outcome of a specific combination of variables, but inherently political, i.e. shaped by history and agency.

Keywords Youth, Politics, Democracy, Contestation

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