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By Dr. Janette Yarwood

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Y'en a Marre activists Thiart and Kiliféu with Le Balai Citoyen activists Sams K Le Jah and Smokey at a press conference in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, June 2014. (Source: Janette Yarwood.)

Dr. Janette Yarwood is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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By Alexander Noyes

Ahead of President Obama’s trip to Kenya and Ethiopia last month, a number of observers [called](#) for Obama to pressure the Kenyan government to recommit itself to security sector reform (SSR) to alleviate its acute security problems. Calls for strengthening security reform in Kenya, and sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, are not new, as SSR programs have proliferated across the continent over the past two decades. Despite the prominence of SSR programs in peacekeeping missions and post-conflict stabilization programs in Africa, SSR initiatives have for the most part shown limited success. Why? [more...](#)



Kenyan Police. (Source: Irene Ndungu, “Police Reforms in Kenya Crucial to Restore Public Confidence,” *Institute for Security Studies*, October 20, 2011 <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/police-reforms-in-kenya-crucial-to-restore-public-confidence>)

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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IDA’s Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Youth and Political Participation

According to an Afrobarometer paper by Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale, political participation [refers](#) to activities by citizens aimed at influencing the selection and decisions of government personnel. Examples include voting in elections and more informal modes of engagement, such as meeting with community members, contacting political representatives, and participating in protests. Other interpretations of political participation [call](#) for youth to be included in formal decision-making.

The now-famous Y’en a Marre protest movement emerged onto the Senegalese political scene in [early 2011](#). The founders—youth activists led by a collective of some of the country’s most well known rappers and journalists—first organized protests to denounce injustice and inequality in the country. The movement then gained mass popularity after then-[President Wade](#) attempted a power grab by changing the constitution and running for a third term in office. The population responded with protests led by Y’en a Marre and other citizens groups. Wade responded to the massive protests by withdrawing the proposed changes, yet he moved forward with his controversial bid for a third term. Y’en a Marre and other citizen coalitions then turned their energy toward defeating Wade at the ballot box.

More modest success was achieved by youth in Burkina Faso. The October 2014 citizen uprising led to the [resignation](#) of 27-year President Blaise Compaoré. The youth-led Le Balai Citoyen (Citizen’s Broom) and Collectif Anti-Referendum (Anti-referendum Collective) were at the head of the protests. Yet once Compaoré resigned, the military [stepped in](#) to fill the power vacuum. A transitional government was then set up, but the youths who had laid much of the groundwork for the protest movement were at a disadvantage as well-established institutions or politicians took control after Compaoré’s departure. The youth-led groups, however, have been able to exert some [influence](#) on the nature of the transition with the continued threat of mass mobilization.

As discussed in the [June 25, 2015](#), issue of *Africa Watch*, citizens in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), [led](#) by the youth collectives [Filimbi](#) and [Lucha](#), went into the streets en masse in opposition to President Joseph Kabila’s attempt to pass a bill that would have allowed him to stay in office. In an interview with the author, an activist explained that Lucha, which means struggle or fight, is a group of young people based in Goma who want to see lasting political and economic change in their country. The activist further explained that Filimbi, which is based in Kinshasa, is a collective of

citizens movements. The DRC Senate ultimately amended the controversial bill. Since then, [opposition parties](#) have once again become the [focus](#) of election discussions.

Y'en a Marre: Political Participation after the Protest

Y'en a Marre achieved its short-term objective in Senegal with the [victory of opposition party leader Macky Sall](#), who defeated Wade in the election. Y'en a Marre's ultimate objective has been to cultivate a Nouveau Type de Senegalais (NTS), or "[new type of Senegalese citizen](#)," one with a heightened sense of civic responsibility. The group remains active, and in an interview with the author, rapper-activist Fou Malade asserted, "Y'en a Marre will continue to act as watchdogs." The collective has launched programs to address issues relating specifically to Senegal, including their [Dox Ak Sa Gox](#) campaign (Democracy and Good Governance), which they see as a platform for monitoring democracy in the country. As part of this campaign, and in collaboration with civil society and various government officials, Y'en a Marre aims to increase citizen participation in policy debates, as well as inform communities around the country about the specific duties of their elected officials and how to hold them accountable.

The author was in Kaolack and Thiès, Senegal, in April and May 2015 for a series of these meetings. Local politicians spoke to community members and discussed various plans for development. Community members then had the opportunity to note their most pressing concerns and to engage in dialogue with the politicians. An elder in Thiès interviewed by the author said, "Y'en a Marre is helping to make sure that we see politicians after the elections, and that's important because we are the people that vote them into office."

The group also organizes a yearly [foire aux problèmes](#) (fair of problems) to bring to politicians' attention the daily problems experienced by the population—like disruptions of water supplies and power outages. Local politicians [are](#) often in attendance. In 2013, the collective also collaborated on a song in support of [Amnesty International's campaign against impunity](#) in the country. The human rights advocacy organization launched the campaign to put public pressure on President Sall to ensure criminal investigations are continued to secure justice for victims of violence and torture during the 12-year regime of former President Wade, especially in the period just before the 2012 presidential elections.

Conclusion

Y'en a Marre's activities illustrate the variety of ways that youth can be active participants in political processes, ranging from focused protest to sustained engagement. The Y'en a Marre protest movement was successful for a number of reasons: clearly identifying its goals; collaborating with other civil society groups; and using an effective media campaign, which included direct messaging to the population, especially the youth, through popular culture. Given the [youth bulge in Africa](#)—nearly 70 percent of the population is under 30—Y'en a Marre's strategy of sustained engagement might deserve emulation elsewhere on the continent.

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Security Sector Reform in Africa

The SSR concept—which aims to professionalize and democratize state security sectors—began gaining momentum in the mid 1990s in international development circles as a crucial component to peace and stability in post-conflict settings. The concept has since been [endorsed](#) and promoted by scholars, the United Nations, and the African Union, among a wide assortment of other stakeholders. After decades of military intervention in politics in Africa and following the "third wave" of democracy in the early 1990s, a number of SSR programs were initiated in Africa.

Such programs have ranged from those with deep international involvement, as seen in post-civil-war cases in Burundi and Sierra Leone, to more domestically driven efforts, as in South Africa. Indeed, scholars have [described](#) Africa as "ground zero for SSR." Political scientist Mark Sedra [argues](#) that Africa "provides an ideal mix of test cases for the [SSR] concept, including post-authoritarian transition states like Nigeria, post-conflict states like Sierra Leone, conflict states like the Democratic Republic of Congo, collapsed states like Somalia, fragile states like Guinea Bissau and more advanced democratizing states like South Africa."

In spite of the large number of security reform programs on the continent, the record of SSR in Africa can be described as mixed at best. In fact, as argued by SSR expert Nicole Ball, "while there has been growing appreciation for the importance of SSR, there have been few clear successes in implementation." Somalia, Guinea Bissau, and the DRC are seen as prime [examples](#) of SSR failures.

What accounts for such failures? International SSR programs in Africa have faced criticism for being overly technical, poorly attuned to political realities, and lacking a sufficient degree of local [ownership](#). Political scientist Alice Hills [maintains](#), "SSR is too normative, prescriptive and ethnocentric to be easily transplanted" to developing contexts such as those in Africa. While the overall record of SSR in Africa is mixed, a few cases stand out as notable, if uncertain, successes, including military reform in South Africa and Burundi and, although incomplete, police reform in Kenya.

Rare, If Fragile, Successes?

South Africa's successful SSR experience after apartheid can be [attributed](#) to its unique circumstances and relatively developed political and security institutions, as well as a high degree of domestic political ownership. Burundi,

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as a post-civil-war country with a history of military coups and ethnic conflict, however, stands out as a surprising, if fragile, [success](#) (especially before the current renewed conflict surrounding President Pierre Nkurunziza's unconstitutional third-term bid, which included a failed military coup attempt in May 2015). SSR was a major element of Burundi's Arusha Agreement, which ended the country's civil war in 2000. According to Ball, Burundi's SSR achievements in reforming and integrating the country's military are due to a sustained (eight year) international commitment led by the Netherlands that made priorities of political engagement at all levels, local ownership, flexibility, and extensive dialogue designed to build trust. As highlighted in the June 4, 2015, [edition](#) of Africa Watch, whether such successes will hold through the current conflict is an open question.

Despite renewed calls for SSR in Kenya, the country's police reform efforts since the 2008 coalition government have also been more [successful](#) than is commonly thought, at least at an institutional level. Although corruption, allegations of extrajudicial killings, and recent efforts to roll back institutional progress continue, various independent oversight bodies were created after the passage of the 2010 constitution, and the police performed in a more professional and [measured](#) manner in the 2013 elections (compared with their disastrous involvement in the 2008 post-election violence). In previous work, the author [attributed](#) this institutional progress to international and domestic pressure, a strong SSR element in the 2008 power-sharing agreement, and a relatively low degree of political influence within the police. With the passage of the 2010 constitution, Kenyans also took major ownership of the police reform process, although international funding and support remain crucial. Again, only time will tell if such institutional gains in Kenya will hold and translate into genuine changed behavior.

Conclusion

Given the limited success of SSR programs in Africa over the past two decades, the cases of South Africa, Burundi, and Kenya offer unique and valuable lessons for international actors involved in SSR in Africa and beyond. International stakeholders should consider incorporating these lessons into SSR programming, with a particular focus on sustained, flexible engagement; attention to domestic political dynamics; and local ownership of the process.

Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.
