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## Africa's second struggle for independence



By Olúfémi Táíwò  
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Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and the current one in Libya are taking place in Africa; not in the Middle East. One would think that this is obvious. But the reporting in the Western-inflected global press might make one think otherwise.

The dominant narrative in the Western press and academia of separating North Africa from the rest of Africa and locating it in a bastard geographical zone called 'Middle East' is meant to show some crucial divergences in the historical experiences of the peoples that populate the different regions of the continent.

More ominously, some might get the mistaken impression that the rallying cry of the movements in the three countries on the boil now-freedom-is something that is not part of the discourse in the rest of Africa. But once we look at the history of the continent and the unifying themes extractable from that history, things begin to look different.

To begin with, North African countries, no less than those of the rest of Africa, were not spared the indignities of being colonized, first, by the Turks, and later, the Spanish, the Italians, the French and the British. It is significant that, as at this writing, the only unresolved colonial issues in Africa are in the north: Morocco.

As a result of this shared experience, all parts of Africa fought the first struggle for independence from colonialism and its depredations. People often lose sight of this because of the artificial separation of the continent both in the literature and in the global, including African, imagination.

Yes, the North Africans secured independence earlier than their peers in the rest of the continent. But that does not mean that the aims that informed their respective struggles for independence were not the same. What is more, they were all united in the goal of their struggle: they wanted freedom.

Africans wanted the freedom to order their own affairs as they see fit; they did not want to be ruled by any government that they had no hand in installing; they wanted their human dignity restored from the battering it had taken under colonial rule; they wanted governments that were responsible and responsive to them. Above all, they wanted to be FREE.

In their efforts towards a continental union which culminated in the May 25, 1963, inauguration of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the original signatories to the Charter included the leaders of the North African countries.

Central to their coming together was to harness their collective strength to preserve the freedom they had just won from colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah, one of those signatories, put it very well: "In our struggle for freedom, parliamentary democracy was as vital an aim as independence.

The two were inseparable. It was not our purpose to rid the country of the colonial regime in order to substitute an African tyranny. We wanted to free our people from arbitrary rule, and to give them the freedom to choose the kind of government they felt would best serve their interests and enhance their welfare."

Unfortunately, once independence was obtained, Africa's rulers, including Nkrumah, decided that the struggle for freedom was over and done with. They proceeded to put in place all manner of political contraptions, all designed to subvert and deny the freedom of their people, turned their citizens to subjects, substituted their wills for those of their people when it came to the

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installation of governments all across the continent.

Any more trucking with freedom? No, they had their coats of arms, their flags, their national anthems, and so on. It was almost as if they thought that the struggle they had led for independence did not include the freedom of individual citizens to have, hold, and seek to realize their own conceptions of the good life; the proverbial freedom to be let alone, especially by their governors; the impermissibility of governmental interference with the details of their daily lives; limits on the powers of government; and the sanctity of their dignity and their life.

Watching the images in diverse media from Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, to limit myself to Africa, the interviews with young and old, men and women, from all walks of life at the barricades, it is clear that, much more than the chronic economic and other problems that they have to deal with daily, paramount in their demands is their absolute insistence that **THEY MUST BE FREE!**

When Mohammed Bouazizi committed the self-immolation that triggered the Tunisian revolution, he wasn't dying for country, ethnic group, or religion: he could no longer take the repeated assault on his freedom and dignity, as well as that of his countrymen and women. Therein lies the ultimate lesson of the current movements for change in both Africa and the Arab world.

The challenge for the rest of us is to ensure that this second struggle for freedom in Africa-it is only a matter of time before other places erupt, too-is not allowed to fail. Africans are reminding us, for the umpteenth time, that freedom is not a geographical, cultural, or national thing: it is a human attribute. Are we listening?

Olufémi Táíwò is Professor of Philosophy and Global African Studies and Director of the Global African Studies Program, Seattle University, Seattle, WA, U.S.A.

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