Global Forces, Rural Radicalism, and the Dual Transformation of Urban and Rural Protest in Africa

Abstract: Studies of protest in contemporary Africa often fail to address three related dynamics. First, rural radicalism has long been more central to African political struggles, even urban ones, than is commonly recognized. Second, the ongoing transformation of rural political economies links them to those of urban areas and has changed struggles over land and resources. Finally, these changes have reduced the power of traditional authorities and increased the appeal of nonviolent protest, as well as shifting protest toward a more national mode in which rural populations are increasingly central. Mampilly elaborates on these propositions, which are derived from brief examinations of both historical and contemporary examples of rural protest across Africa, before applying them to a deep analysis of LUCHA, a social movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Resumo: Os estudos sobre os movimentos de protesto na África contemporânea são frequentemente omissos no que toca a três dinâmicas inter-relacionadas. Em primeiro lugar, o radicalismo rural é, desde há longo tempo, mais importante para as lutas políticas africanas, mesmo para as urbanas, do que tem sido habitualmente reconhecido. Em segundo lugar, a transformação em curso das economias políticas rurais colca-as em ligação com as dos espaços urbanos, e deu um novo rumo às lutas em torno da terra e dos recursos. Por fim, estas mudanças diminuíram o poder das autoridades tradicionais e aumentaram a adesão às formas não violentas de protesto, além de terem conduzido os protestos para formas eminentemente nacionais, em que as populações rurais assumem um papel cada vez mais importante. Mampilly desenvolve o presente artigo com base nestes pressupostos, os quais resultam de breves análises de casos históricos e contemporâneos de protestos rurais em toda a África.

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Zachariah Cherian Mampilly is the Marxe Endowed Chair of International Affairs at Baruch College and an affiliated faculty member at the Graduate Center, CUNY. He is the co-founder of the Program on African Social Research. E-mail: zachariah.mampilly@baruch.cuny.edu

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Em seguida, aplica-os a uma análise mais profunda do LUCHA, um movimento social na República Democrática do Congo.

Keywords: protest; Rural Radicalism; LUCHA; Congo; Tanzania; Sudan

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Calling for the immediate departure of United Nations peacekeepers, protesters gathered in front of UN headquarters in Goma, the capital of the mineral-rich and violence-prone eastern Congolese province of North Kivu, in July of 2022. The protests quickly spread to other cities and towns in the province before turning violent. At least fifteen people were killed, including three peacekeepers. These protests were just the latest in a wide variety of popular mobilizations that have come to define the predominantly rural province over the past decade. Indeed, across Africa, protests in remote and often rural regions have increasingly moved to the fore of national politics, despite the focus on urbanization in scholarly and media analyses.

In this article, I examine the nature and significance of rural protest in contemporary Africa. "Rural radicalism," by which I mean contentious political action that extends beyond existing formal political institutions, including protests, insurgencies, and riots that are prohibited by governments, remains a potent and increasingly important force in African politics today (see Weiss 1967). Bringing together literature on the shifting dynamics of rural life and the ongoing wave of African protest, I suggest three related dynamics that extant studies fail to address adequately.

First, I argue that rural political agency has long been far more central to African political struggles, even those concentrated in urban spaces, than is commonly recognized.[1] Rural agency has often been ignored in favor of narratives that center urban political actors. Second, the political economy of rural areas is being transformed by increased investment from Asian countries that is shifting Africa's position within global capitalism. This investment has impacted how struggles over land and other resources play out in rural areas in ways that link them more directly to the political economy of urban areas. Finally, and related to the above, while the rural is often imagined as the site of atavistic violence, these changes in rural political economy have reduced the power of traditional authorities, diminishing the appeal of violent mobilization in favor of increasingly nonviolent protest. This has shifted the locus of popular political action away from urban spaces toward a more national mode of protest in which rural populations are increasingly central. Rather than reproducing a strict binary that divides the rural from the urban, foreign investment in rural areas produces circular patterns of migration that are increasingly transforming both. I illustrate these trends drawing on recent cases of rural mobilization in Tanzania, Sudan, and elsewhere on the continent.

To explore these propositions in greater detail, I then provide a deep dive into a specific social movement operating in small cities and towns as well

as rural areas of the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. North Kivu province is a particularly useful example, as it brings together many of the trends identified in this article. Located as far away from Kinshasa, the capital, as possible, it is still a major flashpoint in national, regional, and even global political and economic conflicts. Two-thirds of the population continue to live in rural areas even as the country is urbanizing rapidly, and it has been a site of recurring conflict, precipitating the UN involvement, as well as a major recipient of foreign investment.

In 2012, a group of university students in North Kivu began a social movement called Lutte pour le Changement (hereafter LUCHA) to protest the chronic poor governance they encountered. Eschewing both political parties and non-governmental organizations, the young activists focused on local and national issues through education campaigns and creative protests. While it originated in Goma, the movement quickly spread to more rural areas of North Kivu. I examine LUCHA's rise and its approach to mobilizing populations in remote parts of the country. Based on fieldwork conducted in both urban and rural areas of North Kivu in April 2023, including interviews with activists and villagers affected by the recent violence, I argue that LUCHA is engaged in a triple critique of the state, civil society, and the international community, which portends new directions for African protest.

Rural Radicalism, Now and Then

In 2013, more than ten thousand residents of Mtwara, the name shared by a region and its capital along Tanzania's southeastern border with Mozambique, gathered in Mashujaa (Heroes) Park to protest the building of a gas pipeline. The development of offshore gas fields had sparked a massive influx of investment, as more than ten foreign oil and gas companies jockeyed for position. A billion-dollar project funded and built with Chinese money and expertise, the pipeline would transport gas from the depressed region to the booming financial capital of Dar es Salaam to the north.

Residents were outraged, and two large-scale protests drew villagers from across the region. The response was quick and brutal. The government dispatched military troops to quell the protests, killing multiple villagers. National politicians attacked the protesters as parochial and anti-development. President Jakaya Kikwete angrily denounced the protests on national television declaiming that, "Natural resources, regardless of the region where they are found, are the property of all Tanzanians" (*The East African* 2013). Local press called the protests "riots" and demonized the protesters as anti-nationals driven by ethnic and religious resentment rather than engaging in meaningful political action (Mampilly 2013; Must & Rustad 2019). Underlying the criticism was a widespread sense in the rest of the country that residents of Mtwara had long been the most "backward" citizens of Tanzania. Their protests were largely dismissed by the Tanzanian

public, especially in Dar es Salaam, which stood to benefit most from the pipeline.

Such antagonism toward rural radicalism is not unique to Tanzania. Implicit in this prejudice is the idea that African rural areas are still governed by a logic of ethnicity, rendering rural political action simultaneously atavistic, anti-national, and anti-development. If the urban is the space of the popular, where ethnic and religious identities diminish in the face of "modern" forms of power and control, then the rural is still understood as a premodern space under the sway of traditional forms of authority. As such, rural protest is often treated as politically regressive and capable of little more than revealing the passivity of the peasant mind, or worse, masking the violent tendencies that lurk beneath a placid façade.

The study of radical politics and popular movements in Africa, particularly among political scientists and economists, has long evinced a bias toward urban spaces (Lipton 1977; see also Jones & Corbridge 2010). Scholars have argued that African political struggles are predominantly concentrated in capital cities, as elites jockey for position, relegating rural areas into mere stomping grounds. As Thandika Mkandawire writes in an influential essay, it is the "urban crisis" rather than an "agrarian crisis" that motivates political conflicts in most African countries (2002:191). He suggests this is the inevitable outcome of a political dynamic in which conflicts in Africa are either about economic issues or ethnic tensions, both of which come to a head in capital cities. For Mkandawire, the fact that most African peasants still control their labor and have not been dispossessed of their land means they often have few reasons to wage a widescale rebellion against national elites.

This distinction between urban and rural also extends to the management and framing of nonviolent protests.[2] Scholars have shown that African governments tend to view urban protest as a greater threat to political order than rural protests, and hence react to them differently as compared to their rural counterparts (Roessler 2011; Hendrix & Salehyan 2017). Robert Bates (1981), for example, famously argued that fear of urban protest generates a fiscal bias, as governments seek to pacify urban movements by allocating resources to resolve potential sources of contention. This bias extends to the government's use of violence against protests. Repression in rural areas tends to be more deadly due to the use of live ammunition, as compared to the repression of urban movements, which often uses less deadly tools such as tear gas and arrests to halt protests (Christensen 2018).

Combined with the increasing pace of urbanization in most African countries—the continent is urbanizing faster than any other region of the world—it is perhaps unsurprising that studies of African radicalism center urban actors in their analyses, specifically, opposition parties, labor movements, university students and faculty, or non-governmental organizations (collectively referred to as "civil society").[3] While it is often not theorized, the exclusion of rural areas from discussions of African radicalism reflects several longstanding assumptions about the depoliticized nature of rural spaces and their denizens. Many still betray a Marxist reading of rural politics, in which

the peasant remains outside of market forces and beholden to traditional forms of authority that preclude the formation of the class consciousness presumed necessary for radical politics to bloom.

But do such urban-centric accounts of African radicalism accurately capture the nature of popular protests and social movements in Africa today? Undoubtedly, data suggest that most protest activity occurs within large urban areas, and often within the capital cities of most African countries.[4]

Yet anecdotal and other evidence suggests a more nuanced picture, with protests frequently occurring far from the capital. Myriad examples abound. Tanzania has witnessed largescale and sustained protests in rural areas and small towns over the past decade.[5] Across southern Africa, struggles over rural lands have gained strength and become more frequent. In Malawi, for example, the People's Land Organization has engaged in rural land invasions, leading to recurring clashes with government authorities for over a decade (Chinigò 2016). Drawing on a comprehensive dataset of police-recorded protests in South Africa, Martin Bekker demonstrates that "… shifting from counting the number of protests per municipality to counting protestors per capita (per municipality), the national profile of protest shifts from predominantly urban to very much rural" (2022:242). Sudan's recent revolution started in remote areas of the country before arriving in the capital, Khartoum. Many observers suggest the movement's origins in rural areas and small towns was essential for its success, which may have been more easily suppressed had they been limited to the Khartoum region (Elamin 2020; Zunes 2021). Ethiopia's 2014–2018 protests, as with Occupy Nigeria in 2012, gained their strength from their diversified locales that stretched across urban megalopolises and small villages alike. Even protests that take place in urban areas are frequently populated by recent migrants from the rural areas, a nuanced dynamic that reflects the often peripheral and precarious position of rural migrants within urban centers (Branch & Mampilly 2015).

In his influential work, Mahmood Mamdani (1996) challenged the economistic reading of peasant subjectivity, arguing instead for an approach that centers the political over the economic. Mamdani showed that peasant identity, rather than being merely a pre-modern leftover, was transformed under colonial modes of governance that incorporated customary practices into a form of despotic rule. The struggle to impose minority rule over vast populations and territorial spaces—the so-called "native question"—in rural Africa required colonial authorities to refashion "traditional" chiefs into key upholders and beneficiaries of colonial domination through the mechanism of indirect rule. Africa's rural populations were subjected to the arbitrary and coercive rule of despotic chiefs whose authority was manufactured and underwritten by the colonial regime in the name of respecting "customary" law. The outcome was a depoliticized peasantry whose political aspirations had to be mediated through the institutions of the traditional chief.

Rather than overturn such practices once in power, post-colonial African governments deracialized urban spaces while embracing colonial modes of rural subjugation. Even within the non-democratic dispensation that

characterized most post-independence regimes, urban populations were granted the capacity to identify politically in a non-ethnic, ideologically informed manner. Thus, even as they faced repression, robust communist parties that embraced a multi-ethnic and multi-racial politics were common in many parts of Africa throughout the Cold War.

In contrast, rural politics were understood as the domain of ethnic attachment. Political practice was limited to collective struggles for "tribal" advancement in which the primary beneficiaries were traditional elites, who used the spoils of patrimonial rule to sustain their domination over their rural subjects. The main source of their power was the state-authorized control of land, which as Catherine Boone notes, "can embody a kind of social contract that ties land users to political authorities, that defines communities and their relations to the state, and that confers entitlements or claims (however provisional, fragile, or inconsistently honored these may prove to be) on land users" (2015:184; see also Berry 2017).

Among social scientists, neopatrimonialism, in which the rural areas were governed through this combination of rational-legal and traditional authority, became the dominant mode for understanding politics in Africa's rural regions. Critics such as Mkandawire (2015:572) have argued that scholars of neopatrimonialism problematically depict rural populations as "a subordinated people who are inextricably attached to clientelistic relationships, quiescent, and complicit in their own exploitation." But despite such critiques, the neopatrimonialist vision of a passive and subjugated rural population prevailed.

Yet, as Herb Weiss noted in his study of rural radicalism in Congo, "A considerable degree of protest against the colonial regime had always existed in the rural areas" (1967:186). As Weiss argues, rural protest was often viewed as spontaneous and even counterproductive, ostensibly reflecting the captured political imaginaries of the rural political subject, as President Kikwete's comments about Tanzania's rural protesters demonstrates. In contrast, Weiss shows that rural protests targeted not only exploitative tax policies, as might be expected, but also health initiatives that bore no economic content, suggesting they were more selective and hence political than is commonly understood. Consistent with the logic of more nuanced political motivations driving rural protests, these boycotts also never targeted the education sector, for example (1967:198–99). Indeed, under the leadership of the Parti Solidaire Africain, which focused its efforts on organizing a multi-ethnic, socialist challenge to Belgian colonial rule, rural Congolese proved to be some of the most enthusiastic and militant participants in anti-colonial protest—albeit corralled into a subjugated position by the urban-centric leaders of political parties.

In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party similarly relied on the mobilization of rural populations to strengthen the nascent nationalist movement. While rural political agency was still directed by an urban political party, Ghana's nationalist movement forged an uneasy coalition with traditional authorities to mount an effective challenge to colonial domination, a model that quickly spread to many other parts of the continent.

Yet even as rural populations played a central role in numerous popular uprisings, both during the independence struggle and after, it is also true that their participation in political struggles was often mediated by the institution of the chief. Richard Rathbone's study (2000) of Ghana's independence struggle reveals the complex relationship between a nationalist and modernizing political party and the rural chiefs it needed to co-opt, even as it viewed them as relics of an archaic and conservative order. While the CPP was able to forge a fragile truce with traditional chiefs during the independence struggle, the relationship quickly broke down in the post-independence era. The party sought to assert control over rural areas, not by dismantling chieftaincy institutions, but rather by meddling in succession disputes designed to undermine chiefs believed to be too independent of state power, and hence a threat.

Ultimately, not enough attention has been paid to the potential for radical action by rural populations outside of traditional institutions, even as scholars point to the consistent tensions between chiefs and their rural subjects. For example, while Mamdani and Rathbone, among others, have done much to show how villagers have contributed meaningfully to national political struggles, they also view rural populations as essentially bounded, even as they explain the historically constructed reasons for this state of affairs.

But is such a depiction of rural life still valid in Africa today? Where does peasant agency, or more accurately, the agency of rural populations fit into the context of a changing continent, in which rural dwellers increasingly possess livelihood opportunities that go beyond subsistence agriculture? Before we can answer that question, it is first essential to outline some of the larger forces that have transformed rural life since the dawn of the independence era and especially since the start of the millennium.

A Shifting Landscape

For many postcolonial African intellectuals, the state was best positioned to de-ethnicize rural areas, thereby disempowering customary authorities and opening the way to greater agency among the rural masses. As Mamdani argued in the 1990s, "Key to democratization was the Native Authority in the local state: its detribalization would have to be the starting point in reorganizing the bifurcated power forged under colonialism" (1996:288). Yet while he and others called on African governments to initiate the process of detribalizing Africa's rural zones, only a few, such as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and Uganda in the early days of Yoweri Museveni, took up the call, often in ways that produced their own resentments. In Tanzania, for example, Nyerere's sustained attempt to collectivize village life did undercut the power of customary chiefs. But its top-down state-centric approach simply replaced the despotism of the chief with that of the government, before being abandoned altogether (Lal 2015). Similarly in Uganda, efforts to reform chieftaincies and land tenure regimes in the 1980s gave way to state-sanctioned recognition of traditional authorities in the 1990s (Englebert 2002).

It increasingly appears that other processes linked to the particular manner in which Africa has been incorporated into the global economy over the past two decades are undermining the power of customary authorities in ways that governments have been unwilling or unable to do. To better understand the state of rural radicalism today, it is essential to understand these interlocking political and economic processes that have transformed the African countryside. If peasant subjectivity was captured and controlled by traditional institutions during both the colonial and post-colonial eras, contemporary transformations have created increased spaces for rural agency in ways that demand a reconsideration of the portrayal of rural radicalism, and importantly, its centrality to national political questions.

One starting point would be to consider how the repositioning of Africa's rural zones within global capitalism has led to the transformation of rural labor practices. While scholars have devoted attention to the shifting labor identities tied to evolving urban political economies, in particular the lack of formal employment and chronic underemployment that define many African urban economies today (Ferguson 2015), less has been said about what the ongoing transformation of global capitalism means for rural labor identities.[6] As Allen Isaacman has written, most studies of rural politics "have paid relatively little attention to the organization of work." Instead, he argues for an approach that integrates the political economy of rural life into our analysis of peasant subjectivity:

> Work was critical in structuring the rhythm of peasants' daily lives, their relationship to the natural order, the way different groups organized production and consumption and long-term social reproduction strategies and the timing of important social events and religious ceremonies. In short, work or, more precisely, the specific nature of the peasant labor process had a profound impact on the material as well as the cultural universe of peasants. (1990:2)

What are the economic processes at work in Africa's rural areas today, and how have they transformed labor and hence rural subjectivity?

Perhaps the most significant economic shift has been the rise in commodity production and the corresponding inflow of foreign direct investment from Asian economies, especially China, but also India, Malaysia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others (Cheru & Obi 2010; Benabdallah 2020; Koku & AbuFarhab 2019). Asian countries now provide a larger share of foreign direct investment (FDI) than Africa's historic trading partners, the United States and the European Union. Much of this investment in land, oil and gas, minerals, timber, and other natural resources has flowed without even the minimal civil society oversight characteristic of western investments. More relevantly, the rise in Asian FDI has been accompanied by transformative changes in rural land tenure regimes bolstering the power of the state at the expense of traditional authorities. As Boone explains:

> The turn to neo-liberal investment policies has deepened the statist character of the land tenure regime. Legal arrangements set in place over the course of almost a century have facilitated the alienation of village lands to investors, and the development of commercial land transactions throughout much of the national space. (2015:183)

According to Boone, foreign investment has served to reinforce the strength of the African state, unmooring it from its unsteady reliance on traditional chiefs in favor of brute coercion.

During this same period, new rural conflict economies have emerged as the struggle for land and natural resources entrenches and creates political tensions, empowering armed groups and other non-state actors. African governments have outsourced the management of these crises to international actors, namely UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multi-national corporations (MNCs), and even foreign militaries. Indeed, MNCs, NGOs, and international organizations have become a semi-permanent feature of African conflict zones. These actors have transformed rural and small-town economies, providing economic opportunities, shifting the social terrain, and generally reducing the attachment of youths to both customary authorities and government agencies.

Bereft of their historic role in propping up state power in the periphery, traditional authorities have witnessed their influence over rural populations diminish as new economic opportunities provided by international actors provide alternatives to rural youth. Whether through employment in natural resource extraction, as wage earning agricultural labor, or working for NGOs and international organizations, rural Africans are no longer tied to agricultural production under the despotic control of traditional chiefs as they once were.

The strengthening of the African state due to foreign investment and the corresponding untethering of rural youth from customary authorities does not necessarily lead to their political empowerment. Many young people find themselves adrift, forced to abandon traditional lands yet unable to find meaningful work in the formal economy (Honwana 2012). Agriculture has been commoditized and internationalized, as money from Gulf States in particular has been directed toward the acquisition of large, state-funded, commercial agriculture schemes that rely on the transformation of subsistence farmers working ethnically defined lands into wage earners working the same lands for foreign multi-nationals. This transformation of the rural political economy has both created turbulence that triggers migration from rural areas and increased livelihood opportunities that draw migrants to rural areas.

Circulating Migrants

While anthropologists and historians have done important work grappling with transformations in rural political economy, other social scientists

continue to focus on the urban arena when it comes to locating political agency, particularly regarding popular movements. An important exception to the tendency to ignore peasant agency is the work of scholars such as Samir Amin, Sam Moyo, and Issa Shivji. Collectively, they have long insisted that rural life should not be placed outside of modern capitalism, arguing instead that peasant production is integral to the capitalist system (Shivji 2019). Taking this approach seriously entails challenging the compartmentalization of African urban and rural life in favor of an approach that foregrounds the translocal connections between the two.

Writing in the early 2000s, for example, Moyo posits that rather than being a premodern phenomenon, peasant labor is co-constituted with urban economies through the migration patterns that characterize modern African life (Moyo 2005). Rather than being a unidirectional process moving peasants from the rural areas into urban spaces and hence from a premodern to modern way of life, Moyo suggests that migration patterns in Africa are often circular, with peasants moving to cities when work conditions dictate, and, importantly, urban workers returning to their rural homelands when labor conditions are less favorable.

The neoliberal turn that has characterized African economies over the past few decades has made urban work ever more precarious, with a decrease in jobs in the industrial sector and a growing shift to informal labor, a process sometimes referred to as "premature deindustrialization" (Rodrik 2015; Danquah et al. 2019). As rural-to-urban migrants encounter diminishing or precarious employment prospects in African cities, there is little that anchors them to urban areas, suggesting they are likely to return to their rural lives whenever conditions demand. Over the past two decades, such patterns of circular migration linking the urban to the rural are increasing, transforming both (Mercandalli et al. 2017). The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this dynamic, producing a noticeable uptick in urban-to-rural migration as migrants flee the depressed economic opportunities as well as the increased risk of exposure in African cities (Kahura 2020).

What does this mean for African radicalism, and relatedly, the larger question of African democratization beyond the "electoralism" that currently dominates?[7] As we discussed in our 2015 book, *Africa Uprising*, the current third wave of African protests has been fueled by a different segment of the population, which distinguishes these uprisings from earlier waves of protests in the 1950s and 1980s–90s.[8] Many of the protesters in urban areas are drawn from what we refer to as "Political Society" following Partha Chatterjee (2011; see also Neocosmos 2018). By this, we are referring to those elements of the urban population that are marginalized due to their political status and employment in informal sectors of the urban economy. Populating the shantytowns and informal developments that ring most African metropolises, much of urban political society is drawn from recent rural migrants seeking employment and other opportunities within Africa's growing informal economies.

Based on their degraded citizenship status, economic class, or other identity markers, these individuals are poorly represented by existing formal

civil society organizations and actors, especially opposition parties, as well as trade unions and NGOs. In contrast to African civil society organizations that put forth a negotiated, reformist project of advancing human and civil rights through the language of citizenship, this population is viewed by the state as a threat and treated with coercion and neglect. Rather than the reformist demands for inclusion into a corrupt political and economic system typical of formal civil society, political society protest often advances more transformative agendas, calling for upending the entire political and economic system responsible for its marginalization. As a result, political society protests have been more decentralized and often more violent, as the state treats protesters as a greater threat than more conventional civil society-based urban social movements (Branch & Mampilly 2015).

Beyond the transformation of urban protests due to the injection of rural migrants, many recent African social movements, in contrast to earlier waves, have also been active in small towns and rural areas without direction from more elite civil society leaders in capital cities. This rise of rural protests is changing the national dialogue in substantive ways. Rural concerns—whether the violence of counterinsurgency, the sale of natural resources, or the impacts of climate change—are increasingly moving to the center of African political discourses.

In Sudan, for example, rural youth displaced by various agricultural schemes played a significant role in the 2018 uprising. Facing a variety of economic and political crises, Sudanese elites in the mid-2000s began to devise strategies to bring in foreign investment from the Gulf countries to offset losses from the expected secession of South Sudan with its extensive oil resources. According to Nisrin Elamin (2020), over the past decade, some 32 land deals constituting over 5 million acres of land have been leased to Gulf and other governments for periods of between 20 and 99 years. The total amount of land leased to foreign investors exceeds the total held by domestic agribusiness enterprises.

This massive external investment has rendered Sudanese agricultural workers bereft of the land that has constituted the basis of their livelihoods for generations, producing distinct political subjectivities among the rural populations. There are two interlinked routes for this that are often pitted against each other: first, those youth who were traditionally entitled to land based on their membership within a specific ethnic community, and second, youth who migrate into the region looking for employment opportunities. For example, in Um Doum, Elamin argues that investments by a Saudi billionaire in communally held lands led to civil disobedience that successfully pressured the government to cancel the deal. Yet, even as activists drawn from both groups were able to challenge the arrangement, the final agreement excluded workers who were unable to trace their ancestry back to the founders of the village. As she explains, "This particular notion of land ownership as tied to ancestry necessarily marginalizes pastoralists and other mobile communities such as seasonal agricultural workers. This conception of property is in turn protected by land laws that were created by the British colonial government to

facilitate ongoing processes of accumulation by dispossession" (Elamin 2020:22).

As in many other African countries, agricultural labor in Sudan is often performed by migrant workers who are treated as outsiders by the local native authority. Elamin shows that in the Gezira, some 60 percent of the agricultural laborers came from outside the region. Rather than accept their political marginalization, these workers have become increasingly politicized, founding the Kanabi Congress in 2018 to demand better housing and living conditions, and increasingly, serving as a platform for landless workers to involve themselves in other political issues as well.

Thus, we see that in place of a subdued and ethnically dominated rural life, foreign actors are accelerating the diminishment of ethnic attachments and producing a corresponding reduction in the power of customary authorities. Boone notes that since the 1990s, land tenure regimes have come under increased stress due to shifting "demographic, political, environmental, and economic conditions" (2015:178). In some cases, these shifts have produced violent confrontations between agricultural laborers and traditional authorities. But they have also been accompanied by nonviolent protests that have produced substantive transformations of the colonial and post-colonial land regimes.

The net effect has been a reduction in the appeal of violent mobilization in rural areas, which was arguably the dominant mode of rural radicalism throughout the independence period. Rural areas have long been viewed as spaces of political violence driven by political elites seeking to take advantage of the relative ease of organizing armed groups away from areas of state strength. Yet what the reemergence and evolution of rural protests actually demonstrates is that violence is increasingly unsuited for bringing about the type of political change that rural Africans want (Verweijen 2017). In contrast to violence, where the threat of coercion makes it difficult to assess whether armed groups genuinely align with the interests of rural denizens, nonviolent protest is more likely to reflect the actual political intentions of Africa's rural communities. Even as it is susceptible to more coercive forms of control, nonviolent action is likely to remain simultaneously more intractable due to its more organic nature, and positively, more amenable to political solutions than violence.

Social Movements and Rural Protest: The Case of LUCHA

The Democratic Republic of Congo provides a useful case for a deeper examination of these trends. It is well known that Congo has long been the paradigm for Africa's inequitable incorporation into global capitalism. Economically, the country is heavily reliant on natural resources, with cobalt and copper accounting for over 80 percent of exports alone. Foreign investment has led to an impressive annual GDP growth rate that has regularly surpassed 5 percent over the past twenty years, according to the World Bank, yet almost two-thirds of the country's population live in extreme poverty (earning less

than USD2.15 per day). Politically, Congo has been through several cycles of conflict at the national level, with local violence an almost permanent feature of the eastern region for most of the past twenty-five years. The government historically also relied on customary authorities to maintain control over rural areas, where the majority of the population continues to eke out a living, even as this has led to numerous conflicts over land ownership and citizenship.

North Kivu province, located on the eastern border with Uganda, is the epicenter of these trends. During the colonial period, North Kivu became home to a robust plantation economy that transformed the province into the food basket of Congo. The Belgians adopted the common colonial practice of assigning specific lands to groups considered "indigenous" under the control of a native authority. Yet they also imported 150,000 Rwandan laborers between 1928 and 1956 to provide workers for farms and mines owned by Europeans, setting the stage for the recurring disputes over autochthony and land access that have defined the province ever since (Jackson 2006). As Jason Stearns notes, "The waves of immigration and the massive expropriation of land, combined with the Belgians' reform of customary rule, sowed the seeds of conflict" (2012:19).

Goma, the region's capital city, has a population of over a million people spread along the northern shores of Lake Kivu. It is home to a UN peacekeeping force (the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo or MONUSCO), the largest in the world, and it is also North Kivu's primary economic center. But the province remains predominantly rural, with Goma serving as the military and economic hub connecting the province's mines and agricultural production sites with national and international markets (Vlassenroot & Büscher 2009). The emergence of a conflict economy has led to transformative changes in the province's labor markets, with less educated youth finding work in the massive resource extraction sector as well as in the vast service sector that has emerged to cater to the international presence. Educated youth, meanwhile, often find work in low-level positions within NGOs, MNCs, and international agencies. Others languish in the informal economy, with many working as moto-taxi drivers (motos) that proliferate throughout the province.

In 2012, a group of young activists based in Goma started LUCHA with the intention of offering youth an alternative to the armed groups, political parties, and NGOs that dominate the political space in the east (Iñiguez de Heredia 2022). LUCHA activists first came to prominence in 2016 ahead of the scheduled presidential election by organizing protests over the protracted violence and misgovernance that has characterized the Kivu provinces since the mid-1990s. Initially drawn from Goma's small and educated middle class, they sought to frame their movement as a nonviolent popular struggle. Criticized early on for their inability to recruit rural and non-middle-class participants, the movement has worked to deepen its activities in rural areas of North Kivu and beyond.

From the start, LUCHA framed itself as being engaged in a triple critique: against the government, of course, but also against formal civil society and the international community. It originally sought to engage in voter education campaigns ahead of the much-delayed presidential election, but quickly expanded its activities to include a broader critique of the political and economic dynamics that have rendered eastern Congo one of the poorest places in the world despite, or perhaps because of, the international presence. Like several other movements in various parts of Africa, including Y'en a Marre in Senegal and Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso (to which it is often compared and with which it has forged alliances), LUCHA defines itself somewhat vaguely as a "citizens' movement." LUCHA's critique of the state, forged from the lived experiences of young activists who grew up amid the seemingly endless violence and misgovernance that have shaped North Kivu for decades, is harsh: "The state does not really exist. Authorities just pretend that the state is there. People take only the shadow or body of the state for their personal interests," as one activist, Reagan Mitiviki, explained. Yet unlike the armed groups operating in the region who seek to capture state power, LUCHA does not seek to replace the state, but rather to hold it accountable: "I'm not replacing the state. That would be a mistake. As a citizen, I'm doing my part."

Despite its popularity, LUCHA activists have been wary of forging alliances with political parties or even existing civil society organizations. They have learned from their early experiences, and a strong distrust of the formal electoral process has come to define the movement's approach: "We do not trust the political opposition. We don't trust them at all. They purposely sabotaged the momentum we had to kick Kabila out," one activist explained in 2017.[9]

The election campaign also increased distrust of Congo's formal civil society organizations: "We also don't trust the traditional civil society," the same activist said. In defiance of the perceived NGO-ization of civic space that typifies Goma's civil society, LUCHA activists reject calls to further institutionalize the movement, drawing a stark distinction between its model and how "normal" NGOs operate. "As LUCHA, we never want to be registered," Mivitki told me. This suspicion of NGOs extends even to the possibility of collaboration with Goma's formal civil society. Rebecca Kabuo, a LUCHA leader, explained the movement's view: "We don't need to depend on NGOs because we have our own ideology. And they have theirs." Of particular concern was the role of philanthropy and the ways in which foreign donors can shape the priorities of NGOs: "If we collect money from volunteers, we are free to use as we see fit. If we take money from NGOs, we have to follow their rules. We have to put up their banners," she clarified. Referring to Goma's foreign-funded civil society, Mivitki added: "It's a really huge machine that's hard to work with. They always come very late."

In contrast to the perceived rigidity of the NGO world, LUCHA prides itself on its horizontal approach and shared leadership model. "We have no structure," Kabuo claimed. While the movement does have leaders, it is not

arranged hierarchically: "I think of myself as an anarchist," explained Mivitki, echoing several of the other activists with whom I spoke. True to this sentiment, all of the original founders have circled off of the leadership team in favor of new leaders.

Activists also have sought to portray the movement as providing an alternative to the violent organizations active in North and South Kivu's rural areas, including those fighting against the region's extensive mining operations, which as Judith Verweijen (2017) notes, adopt the rhetoric and behavior of earlier radical formations, yet mostly operate in a self-interested fashion. Rather than appealing to the government, political parties, and other civil society actors or the international community for help, LUCHA works to build a social movement that can bridge Congo's urban/rural divide and push rural concerns to the center of Congolese political debates.

LUCHA reserves some of its harshest critiques for the international actors that have transformed Goma into the regional hub for both MNCs and international agencies such as MONUSCO, as well as the plethora of international NGOs that have emerged in their shadow. For LUCHA, international peacebuilders too often take a narrow approach to politics that emphasizes only the bare life of its beneficiaries. In the words of Micheline Mwendike, who is credited as one of LUCHA's founders, international interveners treat Congolese as little more than bodies in need of food and shelter:

> First, for us, dignity means to consider the person as a human being. For example, when we speak of development, humanitarian assistance or refugee settlements, it seems that the human condition is reduced to eating and sleeping. We need to respect and consider people in their human needs, such as the need for political decision-making, not just the economic or material needs. (quoted in Iñiguez de Heredia 2014)

In April of 2021, LUCHA led protests against the UN peacekeeping force in Beni, a small city in North Kivu. These protests followed similar ones in 2019, when protesters stormed the UN base as well as burning down Beni's town hall and the mayor's office. Beni has been the site of recurring battles between militias, government troops, and peacekeepers, and the civilian residents have frequently suffered the consequences of this frequent violence, which resulted in over 300 deaths in the area in the first half of 2021 alone. The killings, which began to escalate in the early 2010s, were initially attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces, a Ugandan group that began operating in the border regions between the two countries but has over time embedded itself within the larger Congolese conflict. Over one thousand people have been killed, many by machetes and other crude weapons, while hundreds have been kidnapped, leading to a massive displacement crisis as villagers flee their remote homes seeking security in more densely populated areas.

Yet while much of the blame for the killings has fallen on the ADF and associated militias, research by the Congo Research Group and others

suggests the involvement of government forces, both from Congo as well neighboring countries. Some argue that this reflects a desire by powerful elements in the Congolese military and government to push the local Nande villagers off their land in order to secure access to the province's rich natural resources, which include timber, diamonds, and gold, as well as wolfram, cassiterite, and coltan. A large percentage of North Kivu's population no longer works in subsistence farming, a form of labor that kept them in thrall to traditional land regimes. Instead, they work in both artisanal and corporate mines, trading the protection of traditional authorities for the greater economic promise, and political insecurity, that mining brings.

The violence has brought together activists drawn from the larger cities in North Kivu with villagers who face the brunt of the region's insecurity. The fragile coalition between LUCHA, which draws its members from among the region's nascent middle classes, and rural miners and farmers, is designed to circumvent the standard narrative around Africa's traditional oppositional politics in two ways. First, by moving the locus of agency away from the "urban crisis" identified by Mkandawire to rural struggles where the vast majority of the Congolese population resides, LUCHA is attempting to disentangle the movement from the electoral logics that historically have shaped Congolese opposition parties. It is also undercutting the authority of traditional chiefs, who historically have viewed themselves as the protectors of Congo's rural populations and have benefitted from patronage from Kinshasa as a result. "The main reason for the conflict is the loss of the power of the chief," a local Mwami complained to me in April 2023. Referring to his perceived loss of status, he continued: "How can you be a chief if you don't have power over the land? Chiefs are linked to the land."

LUCHA is also attempting to delink itself from the international community. Rather than viewing international actors as a benign force designed to rescue Africans from the depravity of their own leaders and other nefarious forces, activists are shedding light on the interlocking relationships between government actors and transnational trading networks, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

It is this second move that most observers have failed to grasp. For example, commenting on the protesters, one senior researcher from Human Rights Watch suggested the protests resulted from a desire for greater protection of civilians from national and international forces: "It is their right to peacefully march to demand that the state [and] UN peacekeepers better protect civilians" (*Al Jazeera* 2021). However, this interpretation of LUCHA's actions was contradicted by the organizers themselves. Clovis Mutsova, a LUCHA activist, offered a sharply different take on the protesters' aims: "We only demand two things: for MONUSCO to leave and for the Congolese government to take its responsibility so that we can have peace" (*Al Jazeera* 2021).

For LUCHA activists, international actors are not driven by moral concerns but rather by instrumental ones that ultimately do little to improve conditions in the region. Mwendike again: "…it is worth pointing out that peace has turned into a job-seeking activity and an activity to earn money…

The same policemen that repressed us have been trained by the European Union" (quoted in Iñiguez de Heredia 2014). What the LUCHA activists reveal by their comments is simultaneously a critique of the Congolese state and civil society and of the international peacebuilding effort designed to shore up their capacity. Rather than simply calling for international action, the activists are demanding a reconsideration of the fundamental relationship between the woefully out of touch African governments and their citizens. In this ideal, international action would be rendered unnecessary as the government, rather than viewing its population as an obstacle to the enrichment of political elites, would provide the basic protections and economic opportunities that the Congolese people deserve.

The fact that LUCHA views its primary constituency as the marginalized communities living in rural areas in the peripheries of the vast country is both novel and potentially promising, assuming they can overcome the prevailing political and economic dynamics as well as their own limitations. During a visit to a makeshift displaced persons camp for people fleeing M-23, the primary armed group operating in the region, I interviewed a group of women with their children. They had settled on a donated parcel of volcanic land north of the city, one of nine informal camps circling Goma. One thirty-year-old woman who had lived in the camp for six months explained that the cause of the conflict was the competition over land between the Congolese government and the Rwandan military, which is accused of backing M-23: "They want our lands, they want our country." Another, referring to Goma Actif, a mutual aid organization set up by LUCHA activists, told me it was the only group attempting to provide for the approximately 1000 people living in the camp. The woman explained that she had not received anything from the government and did not expect to, reflecting the widespread disillusionment with government among rural villagers that activists seek to tap into.

Volunteers reliant solely on donations from city residents cooked simple meals for the residents twice a day. In addition, they provided limited health care and sought to arrange for more serious cases to receive help in Goma proper. Regarding these efforts, one displaced woman told me that the activists have been "so helpful" and are "volunteers with good hearts." While it is unsurprising that beneficiaries of LUCHA's actions view the group positively, even local administrators offered support. "I agree with why they are protesting," one local administrator in the village of Sake told me. "The state has the obligation to protect all citizens. When they feel this is not happening, they have the right to protest." As a result of their actions, LUCHA has emerged as one of the most popular political forces in DRC politics, not just in the Kivu provinces, but nationally. Political parties have regularly made entreaties to LUCHA members to support their campaigns.

Political elites and the Congolese government with the acquiescence of the international community have placed their faith in cynical state-building exercises and shallow electoralism that cannot but fail to meet the demands

of the activists or of the broader population. Opposition parties, in particular, have consistently viewed marginalized communities opportunistically, as a means to secure power for their own set of elites. Rural populations are valued only when they can provide political parties with votes to secure their power before the existing logics of governance resume. By demanding a recentering of the fundamental relationship between the government and its population, LUCHA is on more treacherous terrain, as evidenced by the brutal government crackdowns that have met protesters. Yet while the challenges remain substantial, particularly in regard to the fragile coalition between middle-class youth and impoverished villagers, LUCHA's activism also promises an alternative to the political impasse that has characterized Congolese politics over much of the past three decades.

Conclusion

What would it mean to begin our stories of democratization not among the urban proletariat or middle classes but rather among those most marginalized by the current economic and political dispensation? In other words, what would a story of radical politics that begins among the urban "lumpenproletariat" and the rural masses from which they are drawn look like? This article suggests that an analysis of Africa's ongoing third wave of protest must shift the focus away from the urban trade unions, opposition parties, and middle classes that are commonly depicted as the drivers of democratic change. The interconnections between Africa's growing urban precariat and the transformations of African rural life must be understood as a key driver of this latest wave of African radicalism.

The decline of customary authority in Africa presents new possibilities for rural radicalism. Yet this process is likely to be characterized by both dramatic progress and pushback from those most threatened by the withering away of traditional authority. Foremost among these is the enhanced role of the state, which has been strengthened through its shepherding of foreign capital and its increasing independence from indirect modes of governance that have defined the colonial and post-colonial periods. As many have argued, studying protest is an opportunity to shed light on the evolving nature of state power. What can the study of contemporary rural protest tell us about the ongoing evolution of the African state?

My research reveals that the neat distinction between African urban and rural spaces is increasingly under strain. As new investments geared towards the exploitation of rural commodities drive the unprecedented growth of African economies, rural political and economic concerns have increasingly moved to the center, challenging the urban political and economic bias that has long characterized African politics. As rural economies become increasingly intertwined with national political questions, it is essential to interrogate the ways in which rural populations are attempting to articulate forms of political action that go beyond conventional assumptions of peasant political agency.

Africa's pace of urbanization remains the highest in the world, yet the majority (over 60 percent) of the continent's population continues to reside in rural areas. Rather than being a strict binary, patterns of circular migration suggest that increased attention to the changing African city should not be understood as being isolated from patterns of political and economic change in Africa's rural areas (Paller 2019). Instead, they are being mutually transformed, though in ways that have largely escaped analyses that tend to assume a unidirectional process of urbanization that is presumed to further rural marginalization.

Finally, rather than representing the end of rural parochialism, the incorporation of rural areas into national and international political and economic trends suggests that African village life has entered a new period of identity reconfiguration. The assumption that rural political life continues to be defined by ethnic or religious beliefs is no longer adequate. However, instead of being replaced wholesale by national or secular trends, Africa's rural political identity is more likely to blend elements of the "traditional" with the "modern," portending new relations of state power between Africa's urban and rural spaces and new forms of political action within the rural itself.

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Notes

1. "Agency" refers to the potential for individual action and is a broader concept than radicalism, as it includes both permitted and prohibited forms of action.
2. Lipton's classic statement on the "urban bias thesis" showed how struggles between urban and rural areas had significant policy consequences, with attention and resources generally lavished on urban areas at the expense of the rural areas. Broadly speaking, anthropologists, historians, and certain sociologists pay closer attention to rural life, including acts of resistance, than political scientists and economists. This rich literature has done much to challenge the urban bias present within other disciplines. This essay builds on their insights while attempting to go further by showing how these transformations of rural life should be understood as co-constituted by forces that are simultaneously transforming urban political life as well.
3. Since at least Samuel Huntington's 1968 work, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 2006), scholars have theorized that rapid urbanization can

fuel instability through popular protest. For a critical perspective that challenges the urbanization-produces-protest in Africa thesis, see Fox and Bell (2016).

4. See for example, www.acleddata.com.
5. Most recently, the Maasai in northern Tanzania have been protesting efforts to relocate their community in the name of wildlife conservation.
6. Berry (2017) provides a useful model for how to think about the complicated relationship between foreign economic actors, national political authorities, and rural struggles over land, particularly during the period of structural adjustment in the 1980s and 90s. See also the contributions to Claassens and Cousins (2009).
7. "Electoralism," refers to "the faith that merely holding elections will channel political action into peaceful contests among elites and accord public legitimacy to the winners in these contests" (Karl 1986:34).
8. The third wave of African protest refers to protests that began roughly around 2005, accelerating in the 2010s and continuing into the present day. They follow the first wave of protest during the 1950s and 1960s and the second wave in the 1980s and 1990s.
9. The election was eventually held in 2018 and resulted in Joseph Kabila being replaced by Félix Tshisekedi, the son of a longtime opposition leader. Tshisekedi won the election after striking a deal with Kabila that saw him vault past Martin Fayulu, who was largely considered to have secured the most votes.

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