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## Animating political protests through activism in 21st century Nairobi, Kenya

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### Abstract

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The twenty-first century has seen a rise in the number of protests in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi. These protests are being used to assert the practice of democratic freedoms in face of increasingly repressive controls. This article probes the extent to which contemporary protests use, or are animated through, art and activism (*artivism*). It does so by drawing on 20 months of research in Nairobi (doctoral fieldwork from July 2016 to March 2018), which involved observation and participation in street protests and demonstrations; interviews with twelve artists and activists associated with the social justice organisation PAWA 254, and those responsible for organising street demonstrations; informal interviews with foot soldiers who attend protests and demonstrations; and national/international newsprint, radio and television media. The article argues that artivism's use in protest can be employed to ridicule and mock those in power, it can provide means to mobilise people in novel and often powerful ways, and it has the potential to infuse protest with traits of carnival. But the article also underscores artivism's limitations, such as its potential to divide, antagonise and derail protesters' desired narrative. Given the increasing use of artistic expression by civil society organisations in political protests in Kenya, and indeed across the globe, this article contributes to furthering understandings to artivism's potential in contributing to social change, creating new terrains for political engagement, and the implication this has on democracy.

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## Introduction

On Thursday 3rd November 2016, hundreds of people gathered for a demonstration against high-level corruption at Freedom Corner (a section of Nairobi's Uhuru Park, which has long been a site associated with peoples' fight for justice). Grasping placards and donning red T-shirts emblazoned with the protest's slogan, this mass of bodies visually emphasised and collectively embedded feelings of a community.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary protest songs blasted from a PA system. The words to these tunes – often corruptions of 'traditional' or Christian

petition to Parliament. Signed by civil society organisations the petition demanded the Government's expedient and decisive action against grand scale corruption plaguing Kenya. However, the police violently coerced the protesters out of the park and made arbitrary arrests. Spirits waned. Attempts to reconvene were thwarted.

Unfortunately, the police have regularly disregarded the right of assembly enshrined in Kenya's constitution. Repressive and brutal policing has become normalised. What is evident,

*Speeches made at Freedom Corner during the protest 'President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign': © Craig Halliday*



compositions — were echoed by protesters and invigorated through dance. These elements, and the ebullient crowd, created a mood akin to a festival, boosted by artistic theatricality, large effigies and performance. Speaking about corruption the previous month, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta asked: "ladies and gentlemen, what do you want me to do?"<sup>2</sup> Aptly named *President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign*, the protest retorted Kenyatta's question and together those demonstrating planned to deliver a

nevertheless, is an increase in political protests in Nairobi over the past decade. This spike ties to political scientists' suggestion that since 2011 Africa has experienced a 'third wave' of protests — the first wave having occurred during decolonisation, the second through democratic transitions to multi-party politics in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> In Kenya, explaining this third wave is complex but certain influences can be identified.

The 1990s was a golden age of popular political activism in Nairobi as civil society ushered in fresh

<sup>1</sup> Interviews and direct observations of the protest.

<sup>2</sup> Agutu, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Branch & Mampilly, 2015; Mueller, 2018.

hope for democratisation in the postcolonial East African nation.<sup>4</sup> In 2002, Kenya's second President Daniel arap Moi's 24 years of authoritarian rule ended. The opposition were victorious at the ballot box, instilling a belief amongst the electorate that formal democratic processes could bring change. Following this was a lull in political activism and popular protests, as there was hope amongst the populace that progressive change would follow. This optimism quickly faded as a result of the post-election violence of 2007/8, which resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 and displacement of 600,000 people. But from this came a new idiom of political consciousness in Kenya which saw alternative discursive practices and physical and online sites for their expression forged.<sup>5</sup> Adding to this was the adoption of a progressive constitution in 2010, giving credence to people's fundamental civil and political rights, imparting checks on power, and bringing with it possibilities for reinvigorating democracy in Kenya.<sup>6</sup> It has, however, been argued that the Jubilee coalition — which came into power in 2013, led by Uhuru Kenyatta — has failed in its duty to uphold elements of the constitution, and as such critics point towards a regression of previously made democratic gains.<sup>7</sup>

It is against this backdrop that one is reminded of the political scientist Gene Sharp's warning that the ending of one regime does not bring utopia, but instead paves the way for continuous efforts to build more just social, economic, and political relationships whilst eradicating other forms of oppression and injustice.<sup>8</sup> Kenyans are well aware of the challenge of Gene Sharp and the new wave of political protests happening in Nairobi illustrate this fight for justice and a deepening of democracy.

At one level this is realised through the coming together of bodies on the street who enact their constitutional right to peaceful demonstration.<sup>9</sup>

However, the late Claude Ake points towards further understanding as to how democracy may be invigorated through protests, and that is by creating new terrains for political engagement.<sup>10</sup> As suggested by Ake popular protests can affect society's political consciousness and imaginations, offering revelations to what is possible, whilst providing alternative visions of democracy and development.<sup>11</sup>

Occurring within Nairobi's 'third-wave' of urban protests are those — like the protest discussed above — associated with their radical use of art and performance. The driving force behind this is the civil society organisation PAWA 254 and Nairobi's emerging middle class, as well as activists and artists for whom such tactics contribute to animating twenty-first century activism. Yet the merging of art and activism in protests and the tactics employed in its use brings with it questions regarding the extent to which *artivism* is successful in animating political protests and its potential role in deepening democracy. Though before turning attention to these questions, considerations into the theoretical debates surrounding the concept of *artivism* and its associations are firstly taken into account.

### Art, activism and carnivalesque protests

In 2011, the photographer-turned-activist, Boniface Mwangi, founded PAWA 254 in Kenya's capital city Nairobi.<sup>12</sup> Mwangi's aim for PAWA 254 included the building of activists', creatives' and citizens' capacity to bring about social change through *artivism* — which is the bridging of art and activism.<sup>13</sup> The concept of *artivism* is not specific to Mwangi or PAWA 254 and has similarly been termed as 'activist art',<sup>14</sup> 'artistic activism',<sup>15</sup> 'community art',<sup>16</sup> 'performative democracy',<sup>17</sup> 'cultural resistance'<sup>18</sup> and 'cultural activism'.<sup>19</sup> A

<sup>4</sup> Maupeu, 2010: 373-376.

<sup>5</sup> Ogola, 2011: 132-133; Nyabola, 2018: 29.

<sup>6</sup> Murunga, Okello & Sjögren, 2014: 6

<sup>7</sup> Ghai, 2014; CIVICUS, 2015; Smidt, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Sharp, 1993

<sup>9</sup> See The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Chapter 4, Part 2: 37

<sup>10</sup> Ake, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> The name 'PAWA254' is a combination of Kiswahili slang for power (PAWA) and Kenya's international dialling code (+254).

<sup>13</sup> Mwangi, 2016: 285

<sup>14</sup> Danto, 1991; Duncombe & Lambert, 2013; Duncombe, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Mouffe, 2007, 2013; Groy, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Cohen-Cruz 2002

<sup>17</sup> Weibel, 2015

<sup>18</sup> Duncombe, 2002

commonality between these approaches is their focus on the ways in which art provides new understandings of common concerns, and how political action can become creative in its fight against perceived injustice.<sup>20</sup> Artivism often creates new or alternative ways of political intervention and civil disobedience, which moves beyond conventional forms of activism.<sup>21</sup> Also representing a shift from convention is art's detachment from its orthodox home of the gallery and museum and associated accolades. Instead, artivism is concerned with the domain of daily life, and innovatively using public space.<sup>22</sup> Artivism demands that art is not compelled to simply represent change, but instead becomes part of an action which engages with society's transformation. Scholars of artivism suggest that this is achieved by drawing on a range of potentiality: to unite people, to question the status quo, to disrupt everyday life, to instruct or persuade, to improve public understanding of civic issues, and to create new or different physiological experiences.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, it has been argued, artivism with its counter-hegemonic tendencies, represents an important dimension of radical politics.<sup>24</sup>

Interpretations of artivism are, however, not without criticism. For instance, Boris Groys notes that the artworld critiques it as a lowering of aesthetic quality, whereas political scientists criticise it as a distraction from the practical goals of political protest.<sup>25</sup> In response, it can be argued that artivism's interdisciplinary nature and methodology should not be understood within the purview of one subject but rather be seen as an 'indiscipline' in its refusal to be restricted by the discipline of art or political science.<sup>26</sup> This matters because in today's world, as the political theorist Chantelle Mouffe reminds us, political questions are those which affect our everyday lives now and

in the future and, as such, are not issues to be left exclusively in the hands of experts.<sup>27</sup>

As this article will demonstrate, artivism is often theatrical. It can be funny and creative at the same time as it can ridicule and mock; artivism can bring people together in new, creative and often powerful ways, but it can also divide and antagonise. As may be expected of an indiscipline, artivism is at times messy and disordered; but it does, nevertheless, offer opportunities to expand on the ways of engaging with politics and help to both understand and practice social change. The element of artivism apparent in protests happening in Nairobi is expressed by activists as giving protests a 'face-lift'. Furthermore, the atmosphere and aesthetics of these protests are regularly attributed to analogies of carnival by those who participate in them.<sup>28</sup> In the words of one activist:

"There is a notion that demonstrations are violent but when you include symbolism and performance they become like a carnival. People at the protest start having fun... the use of art and performance puts them on a different level. This carnival aspect changes the mood. People are still angry and frustrated – that is why they are there — but the art and performance provides a different way of looking at the problem, it provides a moment when people can also have fun, it kind of ridicules the issues but without losing sight of what we are there for." <sup>29</sup>

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on medieval carnival in Europe is frequently cited as a framework within which both the global north and south can think about and understand contemporary protests shaped by artistic considerations. In Bakhtin's classic work, *Rabelais and His World* (Russian; 1965), his concept of carnival is characterised by the creation of an alternative space, one typified by freedom, by moments where anything goes, and where lines between performer and spectator are erased. As Bakhtin argues: 'In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act... The laws,

<sup>19</sup> Verson, 2007; Buser et. al., 2013

<sup>20</sup> Harold, 2007; Buser, et.al., 2013; Weibel, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, 2016: 2

<sup>22</sup> Purakayastha, 2014: 57; Mesquita, 2015: 495

<sup>23</sup> Cohen-Cruz, 2002: 6; Stern & Seifert, 2009; Bala & Zangl, 2015; Duncombe, 2016: 116

<sup>24</sup> Mouffe, 2007, 2013

<sup>25</sup> Groys, 2014

<sup>26</sup> Jordan, 2016: 2

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, 2007: 2

<sup>28</sup> Ombati, 2017: 206

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Kimani Nyoike, (29/12/2017).

prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary... life are suspended during carnival'.<sup>30</sup> Widening this reading, the art historian Frances Connelly's interpretation of Bakhtin's carnival sees 'the carnivalesque as the voice of the people, as the vehicle of self-expression for the usually suppressed and regulated proletariat.'<sup>31</sup> For political theorist Andrew Robinson it is precisely these features which suggest how carnival 'occurs on the border between art and life'.<sup>32</sup> It is at this fringe that Bakhtin's concept of carnival blends the fictive and the real, combines mockery, debasement, humour, displays of excess, and an anarchic aesthetic that draws on the grotesque and vulgar.<sup>33</sup> Considering the temporality of carnival, other authors write of how for this brief period life escapes the mundane, the world may be turned upside down, and the everyday can be

world and used in contemporary activist initiatives, they have been credited with the ability to oppose repressive forms of government and become a resource for political action.<sup>35</sup> Having taken into account the theoretical debates of activism and the concept of carnival, the following sections relate these to political protests in Nairobi.

### Shock, surprise and media stunts

In early 2013, as Kenya's Parliament was coming to a close for the general election to be held in March, the 221 sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) tried to drastically increase their end of term financial bonuses and other perks. Included in this was their request for a State funeral, when the time came. Outraged by MPs' voracious demands and sense of self-entitlement, PAWA 254 organised the protest *State Burial*. According

221 mock coffins are burnt outside Kenya's Parliament Building as part of the protest *State Burial*: © Joel Likhovi



replaced with visions of utopia.<sup>34</sup> When these qualities of carnival are experienced in the real

to one of the organisers: 'the plan was to give MPs the State funeral they wanted.'<sup>36</sup> 221 mock coffins were arduously made by a group of artists. Painted black, with the words 'State Burial' and

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, 1984: 122

<sup>31</sup> Connelly, 2003: 9

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, 2011

<sup>33</sup> Kershaw, 1997:263; Götcke, 2015: 130; O'Leary, 2015: 294

<sup>34</sup> Kershaw, 1997: 264; O'Leary, 2015: 294; Bruner, 2005: 141

<sup>35</sup> Bruner, 2005:151; Ngoshi, 2016: 54

<sup>36</sup> Interview with activist Martin Njuguna Mugo.

‘Ballot Revolution’ written across them, the coffins were delivered to Uhuru Park on January 16th 2013.

As hundreds of protesters gathered that morning an overt parody of MPs’ demands for a State burial began. A satirical funeral service was held and the coffins were carried in a mock procession to Parliament Building — acts that elicited the communal and bonding essence associated to ‘African’ funerals.<sup>37</sup> Akin to aspects of Bakhtin’s carnival, this provided new modes of interrelationship between individuals to occur as each coffin was collectively carried due to their size and weight.<sup>38</sup> First-hand accounts from participants in *State Burial* suggest these artistic and performative additions embolden the public’s participation as they create a carnival atmosphere and involve actions which entice people to come together in the street — effectively acting as a means of mobilisation.

Outside Parliament Building the coffins were piled together, doused with petrol and set ablaze. Just as in carnival, for a brief time, the rules of everyday life had been suspended. Boniface Mwangi says the reason for this act was because ‘when you want to clear the field you burn it and then you plant, so this is what we are doing, we are burning it to start afresh with new leaders.’<sup>39</sup> Thus, the huge inferno can be interpreted as a celebration denoting the recurring democratic process of Parliament shutting before an election is held, with the prospect and desire for non-performing MPs to be replaced. Through activism the protesters visually projected to those in office (the MPs), and indeed those vying for a position in office, that they (the electorate) hold the power to remove them.

The account projected by *State Burial* countered what was an otherwise impassive public sphere during the election period. A vast peace narrative enveloped public debate which fostered what some academics have termed as ‘peaceocracy’, because an overwhelming emphasis on peace and stability was to the detriment of the more critical

debates expected in a healthy democracy.<sup>40</sup> Activism’s intentional use in *State Burial* was to generate a stunt worthy of the media’s attention, thus acting as a means to reinvigorate the public sphere and generate critical debate. Having previously worked for media houses as a photographer Boniface Mwangi understood such dynamics, saying:

“As a photographer, I covered many protests and found them uninspiring. I thought the messages could be presented differently so that the protest gets attention from the media and citizens. I felt that protests ought to be designed to convey the message to as many people as possible with whatever means available. This should include means that shock them if possible, in order to dominate conversations of the day or season with the action and message of the protest.”<sup>41</sup>

The realm of the media and the political are increasingly intertwined and as such Mwangi’s emphasis on creating media stunts can become an important part in the realm of politics. In his research on theatricalised forms of protest, the academic Baz Kershaw has alluded to this saying: ‘in its desire to capture the high points of the “news” the media may well play into the hands of the people creating the events. The media tend to pick out the performative precisely because the performative stages the dramas that the media consider to be the “news”.’<sup>42</sup> The media may not see a few hundred people protesting as being a significant enough story to cover; however, the sight of hundreds of coffins set ablaze outside Parliament certainly is. For the authors of activism’s use in protest the element of shock and surprise is paramount. In the case of *State Burial* very few people knew that the coffins would be set alight. It might have been assumed by the majority of the protesters that the coffins would be left outside Parliament Building in a similar manner to an earlier protest organised by PAWA 254, entitled *Love Protest*, which took place seven months before *State Burial*. Evidently, however, this would not have been in line with the flamboyant tactics of Mwangi who says: ‘we’re

<sup>37</sup> Mack, 2019

<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, 1984a: 123

<sup>39</sup> Citizen TV, 2013

<sup>40</sup> Lynch, Cheeseman & Willis, 2019

<sup>41</sup> Mwangi, 2016: 294

<sup>42</sup> Kershaw, 1997: 260

not here to soothe your emotions or soothe your ego, or make you feel comfortable. We want our work to make you feel uncomfortable, to do something.<sup>43</sup> Whilst the purpose of such tactics are logical, what will become evident in this article is that at times media stunts produce a volatility of meaning which disrupt the protest's intended message. As a means to begin unravelling why this is so, but to also reveal further possibilities of animating protest through activism, attention now turns to another demonstration organised by PAWA 254.

### Vulgar aesthetics and strategies of debasement

On 14th May 2013, civil society organisations (including PAWA 254) coordinated the protest *Occupy Parliament* – objecting MPs' efforts to increase their £50,000 annual salary. For the everyday Kenyan, this move represented unfathomable greed in a country where average income is below £100 a month. Hundreds attended *Occupy Parliament* which culminated outside Parliament Building. The demonstration then entered a new phase, incorporating grotesque and vulgar aesthetics. Tens of live piglets (dressed in neck ties with the slogan 'MPigs' spray painted across their bellies), a bulky male pig, and a severed pig head took centre stage and litres and litres of rancid, rich, red blood, were emptied onto the street. Describing this approach one artist associated with PAWA 254 asserted: 'the best way to go out there hard is to come up with the most disgusting, the most horrible, shocking, and radical kind of stuff'.<sup>44</sup> According to Mwangi, the use of pigs was a means to communicate unequivocally the behaviour of MPs, saying 'we don't want you to start trying to get a meaning, we want to give you the meaning... pigs are greedy, these guys [MPs] are pigs, that's why we give you pigs'.<sup>45</sup>

There is a rich history of visual artists in Kenya, most notably cartoonists, using anthropomorphism in their work in order to denote the supposed characteristics of MPs. The

popular cartoonist Gado has for many years denoted MPs as pigs, vultures, fat cats, hyenas and crocodiles. According to Gado, one of the reasons for this approach is that it enables one to attack the political elite, whilst not naming anyone in particular, thus not risking the possibility of becoming embroiled in a libel suit.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 2012 PAWA 254's initial foray into activism saw four of Kenya's top graffiti artists depict MPs as vultures – an animal whose unpleasant character is manifest in a life of scavenging, opportunism, and preying on the frail – in a series of illegal murals in downtown Nairobi.<sup>47</sup> Occupy Parliament, therefore, can be seen as continuing this approach through employing strategies of debasement and reversal. In his writing on playful political protests, academic Florian Göttke describes such tactics as a means to 'establish a temporal alternative order, bestow[ing] carnival with inherently power-contesting traits'.<sup>48</sup> This is evident in *Occupy Parliament* through MPs being exposed for what protesters see them as – pigs who wallow self-absorbed in their own blood, piss and shit which they do in total disregard of the common citizen.

If the use of pigs during *Occupy Parliament* is interpreted as an attack on MPs, then this attack is also notable for its decision to partly reject the ambiguity made available in the acts of anthropomorphism discussed above. This is because unlike the piglets who were used as a representation of all MPs, painted across the hog's fat belly were the specific names of three MPs. These three MPs were perceived to be the most vocal supporters of the unconstitutional proposal to disband the Salaries and Remuneration Commission, in an effort to enable the salaries of MPs to be increased. One of those named was Aden Duale (the Majority Leader of the National Assembly) who on his grounds as a Muslim was totally enraged, saying: 'This is an insult and an affront to my religious liberty by associating me with an animal that my religion prohibits'.<sup>49</sup> The objection to the pigs, on religious grounds, likely concerned other members of the

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Boniface Mwangi (14/08/2015)

<sup>44</sup> Interview with artist and activist Swift 9 (26/01/2018).

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Boniface Mwangi (14/08/2015).

<sup>46</sup> Gado, 2012: 131

<sup>47</sup> Ombati, 2015

<sup>48</sup> Göttke, 2015: 136

<sup>49</sup> Mosoku, 2013

Islam religion who constitute 10% of Kenya's population. During the initial planning of this stunt concerns were raised regarding the possibility of pigs causing offence to religious sensitivities. The use of pigs and blood, however, can be read as a tactic employed to create vulgar moments undermining authority, giving marginal subjects some kind of temporary power, through a suspension of ordinary rules and norms regarding what behaviour is acceptable. As one activist recalled: 'Our leaders understand the language of shame. So our artistic impressions have a connotation of shame and anger. Only then will politicians come to their sense and start realising their behaviour is wrong'.<sup>50</sup> The tactic of using grotesque aesthetics recalls suggestions in Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque, that when a kind of symbolic degradation is performed it brings the elevated back down to earth and all that is high, low.<sup>51</sup> Such an approach begs asking whether certain strategies of activism in protests risk alienating people rather than mobilising them to the cause they are fighting for, something which is now considered.

### The confines of laughter and mockery

The social scientist Michael Billig writes of how outwardly mocking the rules and the rulers is a form of 'rebellious humour' that conveys moments of freedom from the restraints of social convention.<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin also suggested that laughter was positive, claiming 'seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him... laughter only unites; it cannot divide'.<sup>53</sup> Although just as laughter, ridicule and humour can bring people together, it can also in the end divide.<sup>54</sup> It may even, as Billig asserts, 'help maintain the order that it appears to mock'.<sup>55</sup> In *Occupy Parliament*, the representation of MPs as greedy pigs was in some instances laughed at by the powerless at the expense of the powerful. However, when laughter is at the expense of the

powerless — even if the powerless is a non-human entity, which in the case of *Occupy Parliament* was a live pig and piglets — then it is unsurprising that some people found it distasteful. A case in point is that some of the artists who had been at PAWA 254 since its inception, discontinued their work with the organisation citing the extreme tactics of activism and use of live animals as one of the contributing factors to their decision.

Through its use of activism *Occupy Parliament* succeeded in creating a media worthy spectacle. The protest was reported on live across news stations in Kenya and received significant coverage from national and international media. *Occupy Parliament* was also enthusiastically spread and magnified by Kenyans on social networking sites.<sup>56</sup> Data collected from Twitter using a search of *Occupy Parliament's* official hashtag reveals the protest was 'tweeted' about over 8,500 times.<sup>57</sup> However, many activists bemoaned the media sensationalising the bloody scene of frenzied pigs and their inaccurate reporting of the event. For example, online news reports in Kenya's *The Star* and *Standard*, falsely claimed 'at Parliament buildings, the protesters slaughtered a pig and three piglets',<sup>58</sup> and 'Bonnie Mwangi & Co slaughtered pigs outside Parliament on Tuesday morning as an analogy of MPs' greed'.<sup>59</sup> No pigs were slaughtered outside Parliament Building that day. As one activist explained: 'the severed pig head symbolised how MPs will feed off anything, even their own kind if it means they can fill their bellies, and the blood represented how the political elite are bleeding Kenyans dry.'<sup>60</sup>

An analysis of 29 online national and international news reports concerning *Occupy Parliament* divulges the extent to which this stunt garnered the media's attention. 72% of headlines

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Erick Matsanza (19/10/2017)

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, 2011; O'Leary, 2015: 294

<sup>52</sup> Billig, 2005: 208

<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin, 1986: 134-5

<sup>54</sup> Berger, 1997: 57; Leftcourt, 2001: 72

<sup>55</sup> Billig, 2005: 200

<sup>56</sup> Mukhongo, 2014; Tully & Ekdale, 2014

<sup>57</sup> Data was collected from Twitter using the search tool, where an 'advance search' was conducted for all Tweets containing the *Occupy Parliament's* official hashtag. The search collected Tweets from a fixed period of 15 days – 7 days before the protest, the day of the protest, and 7 days after the protest.

<sup>58</sup> Wekesa & Were, 2013

<sup>59</sup> Mochama, 2013

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Erick Matsanza (19/10/2017).



mentioning 'pigs' or 'piglets' and of the articles which used imagery 83% exhibited pictures of the bloody pigs. In the main body of text 96% of articles mentioned the use of pigs and why the protest was taking place. Of notice, however, was that 65% of articles discussed in detail the protesters' concerns and reason for demonstrating. That said, approximately 25% of articles criticised (directly or indirectly) the protesters approach and those that did raised issue with the welfare of animals used in the protest.

The metaphor of a pig as an MP was easily understood by the public, however this was distorted through the use of live pigs. In a sense, the authors of this stunt lost control over the relationships between the symbolic and the real because they assumed a transparency that could not be sustained in the face of the contradictions produced by events. Unintended narratives regarding animal rights entered conversations that were planned to be about the greed of MPs. As a result, voices that were critical of the Government were at times deflected by shouts of animal abuse and as a consequence the protesters inadvertently came to be protested against. *Occupy Parliament* therefore raises a number of methodological considerations for activism's use in carnivalesque protests. As highlighted by Kershaw in his study of dramatised popular protests, the performative always promotes an instability of meaning and as a result 'the significance of the event may thus more easily be turned against the authors'.<sup>61</sup>

A month after *Occupy Parliament* demonstrators rallied once again in order to show that their disapproval to MPs greed had not waned. The protest, dubbed *Occupy Parliament Reloaded*, was associated with PAWA 254, but this time no live animals were used. Instead a huge effigy of a pig was paraded to Parliament Building where it was theatrically destroyed. Fake bank notes containing imagery of pigs were hurled with small denominations of coins at Parliament in an act mocking how Kenyans are happy to give the greedy MPigs everything they have. In both

*Occupy* protests those taking to the streets never amounted to more than a few hundred, but their presence physically embodied the angst and anger of most Kenyans, whilst the media stunts visually projected to the nation, and indeed the world, the public's outcry. Perhaps an indication to the perceived effectiveness of bringing pigs to Parliament was its mimicking in neighbouring Uganda by the activist group Jobless Brotherhood. However, more so an indication to activism's potential effectiveness is the fact that following both *Occupy* protests MPs succumbed to public pressure and rescinded their brazen demands for higher pay.

### State violence and carnivalesque protests

One ugly element of protest is police violence and intimidation. For example, the authority's response to *Occupy Parliament* was particularly aggressive. The protesters were dispersed with tear gas and water cannon; they were intimidated with police dogs and police horse units; a number of protesters were beaten and arrested. As has been critiqued in carnival theory, after occasions of expressive dissent 'normal social order resumes – therefore reinforcing the dominant order by momentary act of juxtaposition'.<sup>62</sup> As a result of restricting civil liberties, the Jubilee Government, led by Uhuru Kenyatta, has been accused of taking Kenya back to the dark days of former President Moi.<sup>63</sup> At a protest in 2017, Boniface Mwangi was deliberately shot in the chest at close range with a tear gas canister by a policeman. The irony that the protest was against 'police killing protesters' (and at the time Mwangi was carrying an oversized model bullet with the words 'STOP KILLING US') seems to have been lost on the police. Such tactics, which aim to instil fear amongst those wishing to express dissent against the Government (an imposed form of State censorship), can, I argue, also be viewed as the postcolonial State's moment of violent carnival. In this moment of violent carnival anything goes, police impunity reigns, and vicious displays of the State's power over the citizen is asserted. However, activists also use and at times provoke the State's violent carnival in order to reveal not

<sup>61</sup> Kershaw, 1997: 259

<sup>62</sup> Robinson, 2011

<sup>63</sup> Ghai, 2014

only the State's apparent anxiety over opposition and dissent, but also to expose the State's tendency to use violence as a means of exerting authority. A protest employing activism, which took place on February 13th 2014 and entitled *#FEB13Protest*, illustrates these points.

caused controversy signing into law a draconian media bill then declaring afterwards that newspapers were 'only good for wrapping up meat'.<sup>65</sup> This activist went on to say: 'leaders had become reckless in their addresses, so we were like, "ok that's what you think as a leader, that's a kid's way of thinking.'" It is time we don't have kids

*An activist standing in front of a pig effigy and emptying blood onto the streets during the 'Occupy Parliament Reloaded' protest: © Phil Hatcher-Moore*



Planned months in advance, *#FEB13Protest* was a call to citizens to hold the Government accountable. One of the organisers remarked: 'we felt many issues which led to the 2007/8 post-election violence had not been resolved; we still had impunity, corruption, tribalism, and poverty, so the protest was to remind Kenyans that we hadn't really moved forward'.<sup>64</sup> *#FEB13Protest* was part of a larger campaign called *Diaper Mentality* which criticised what it claimed was 50 years of stunted growth as a nation (having gained independence from Britain in 1963). Speaking of this, one activist recalls how Uhuru Kenyatta

leading our nation.' However, just hours before the protest was due to start the Government banned it, accusing the organisers of trying to overthrow them through street protests, with alleged financial support from the United States Agency for International Development. Undeterred, the organisers persisted with their plan and were joined by hundreds of demonstrators. Carried by the protesters were huge baby effigies made of polystyrene and papier mâché, symbolising what they perceived to be Kenyans' immaturity. Also brought along, in a humorous and mocking fashion, were rolls of

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Kimani Nyoike (29/12/2017)

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Erick Matsanza (19/10/2017)

toilet paper because, as one activist says, ‘we wanted to tell our leaders to stop using diapers and start using toilet paper because when you become an adult this is what you do.’<sup>66</sup>

The demonstrators never made it to their planned meeting point. Instead they were met by police and anti-riot units who made arrests of four human rights activists whilst also launching a cascade of tear gas forcing the crowd to be dispersed. Speaking to *Voice of Africa* news, Reverend Timothy Njoya said ‘we came here to make a statement on the state of the nation. To assess how much we've been able to accomplish, but it seems that the police have made the statement for us, and they've made it very loudly and clearly’.<sup>67</sup> This response by the authorities perhaps calculatedly, on the part of the protesters, played into the *Diaper Mentality* narrative. As expected the protesters were unable to complete their demonstration but they were, nevertheless, able to generate a media stunt. Images of the police violently dispersing protesters and then kicking huge baby effigies across the street and rounding them up in the back of their vans spread through social media and news outlets. Additionally, rather than causing activists to lose morale or become consumed with fear, one protester claimed the actions by the State “re-energised people because suddenly the highest security organ in the country got to a point where they felt a mere protest could topple a government. So, we must have been doing something right.”<sup>68</sup> However, such optimism risks obscuring the State’s own violent carnival. Having rebelled and laughed at authority through carnivalesque protest, the demonstrators became all the more aware of the State’s power. Clearly, such scenarios reveal complexities regarding relations of power at play between the State and areas of civil society as they both use each other to make, breakdown and then remake narratives of domination, legitimacy and resistance.

## Conclusion

This article has assessed the possibilities to

animate twenty-first century protests in Nairobi through activism. The numerous methods discussed relate to Stephen Duncombe’s concept of ‘Æffect’ – that is the possibilities of activism generating some form of change, to move the material world and to have an effect; and the potential for activism to generate affect by moving a person’s heart, body, and soul.<sup>69</sup> At the right time, in the right context and through appropriate tactics middle class activists in Nairobi are leading the way in using activism as a creative means of public resistance which can be used in efforts to defend citizens’ liberties and personal freedoms. Historically, popular protests in Nairobi have played a significant role in the winning of democratic rights and extending them. As a means of concluding this article it is necessary to reflect on activism’s use in Nairobi’s so called third wave of protests and their bearing on democracy and development.

A striking feature of protests animated through activism is their professionalisation, which relates to recent debates regarding the ‘NGO-isation’ of social movements.<sup>70</sup> The protests discussed above, and indeed other protests associated with PAWA 254, make apparent this professionalisation as they draw support from international donors, elaborately brand their movement through printed T-shirts, banners and placards, are savvy in their use of social media, and pull off ostentatious stunts, which often require considerable resources to stage. Those participating in these protests express them as offering alternative avenues to participate in acts of dissent and civil disobedience; to catalyse unusual cognitive and emotional experiences of activism; to engender cohesion; and to animate protest through characteristics of carnival.

That said, and despite efforts at mobilising the masses on the ground, protests employing activism in Nairobi cannot point to large numbers of participants or, as of yet, a significant social movement being built. In explaining this, the

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

<sup>67</sup> quoted in Joselow, 2014

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Kimani Nyoike (29/12/2017).

<sup>69</sup> Duncombe, 2016: 118

<sup>70</sup> Choudry & Kapoor, 2013

'NGO-isation' of social movements employing activism was one reason frequently cited by previous, and would be, participants of protests in Nairobi. The often vague and/or broad goals of protests, such as demonstrating against corruption and impunity, come across as abstract to the masses because they reflect the language of donors. When more narrowly defined goals and objectives are at the core of protests (such as those made during *Occupy Parliament*) a broader coalition of support across society is evident.

of narratives and discourse about the matters that shape their society.

Additionally, activists suggest that the spectacles created as a consequence of staging mock funerals, creating huge infernos, bringing laughter and vulgarity with pigs in Parliament, or exposing the State's violence with the help of baby effigies, catch the attention of international organisations and foreign governments. Having got their attention activists expect these influential bodies to pressurise the Kenyan Government into making

*Baby effigies used during the '#Feb13Protest' are rounded up and put in the back of a police van: © Phil Hatcher-Moore*



However, the dynamics of protest cannot be gained by counting numbers alone. It is evident protests organised by PAWA 254 are geared towards being media events that use aspects of activism in order to gain maximum publicity. It was suggested by activists that using the media this way amplifies the protest, and indeed acts as a megaphone for those unable to participate. In doing so, and as a result of entering the public sphere through various domains, the protests are able to include a wider public in their generation

required changes in order to improve the nation's course of development. The extent to which popular protests deploying activism might contribute to making this happen, however, requires further research. Nevertheless, what this article has made apparent is that the real value of activism may well exceed its potential in animating street protests and creating new terrains for political engagement. That is because activism excites political imaginations and consciousness, making possible new visions for a more radical politics and better world to emerge.

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