

INTERROGATING YOUTHS' INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS AND IMPLICATIONS ON VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: Protests, whether violent or non-violent are part of the instruments deployed by youths to express their dissatisfaction with poor governance and non-inclusion in decision-making in Nigeria. To the youths, their relevance in politics seems to begin during election and terminates as soon as elections are over. Changing this narrative becomes critical for these youths in order to enable them to utilise their potentials and contribute to national development. This scenario raises a number of questions: what have been the activities of youths within political spaces and decision-making over the years? Are they involved or excluded and why? The present article interrogates these and other issues and makes suggestions on how youths' potentials in Nigeria can be properly harnessed, developed and utilised for the benefits of both youths and the citizenry as a whole.

Keywords: *youths, decision-making, governance, exclusion, election, violence, Nigeria*

Introduction

Youth marginalisation in political spheres and decision-making is not a new phenomenon globally (National Democratic Institute 2022). Different stories across the globe regarding their marginalisation and their struggle for recognition within these fields coupled with different challenges and obstacles they encounter saturate the literature (NDI 2022). In spite of the challenges young people face across the globe, they have been recognised as important demographics for development and progress (NDI 2022). Many international agreements, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, and the Inter-

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Parliamentary Union's Resolution on Youth Participation in Democracy have testified to this by emphasising the importance of youth participation in politics and decision-making. These developments, coupled with the age-based challenges they face are bringing a new wave of engagements and disruptions, which are targeted at reinforcing their frustrations regarding their predicaments.

Youth violence is an extreme form of aggression committed by young people against individuals, families or the society. Youth violence can sometimes be a form of street justice in response to institutional failures. Political violence, the focus of this article, is defined as the deliberate use of power and force in order to achieve political goals (World Health Organisation 2002); it involves physical and psychological acts intended at causing injuries, deprivations and withdrawal of basic needs and rights, or intimidations to the society (WHO 2002). Hibbs (1973:91-96) further submits that political violence must cover three important areas: it must have political significance, the behaviour or activity must be anti-system, and lastly it must involve collective action. Globally, young people have been identified as agents of change and as actors in election-related violence (UNSSC and ZIF 2015). This activity is influenced by social, psychological, economic and political factors as political actors often utilise them to support their political objectives.

In Nigeria, the focus of this discourse, series of long-term interdependent relationships between political parties and youths have been identified, in which the imbalance in the relationships have led to altercations locally and nationally between the duos. Within the political settings which the present article will draw analogies from, news of youths' activities (as they relate to violence and other forms of protests) filter through the pages of national dailies and social media. Before election, youths are typically useful for the politicians, yet it appears they are often discarded soon after. Due to their age and population, they often serve as an instrument for winning an election. They appear to be accessible for politicians as tools for winning elections. However, many politicians appear to discard them after winning elections. From observation and reactions of the youths, the era of keeping mum over their predicament appears to be over; they have continued to express their dissatisfaction with the inclusion-exclusion strategy adopted by the politicians. The questions coming to mind are: Why are these youths lending in their voices through violence? What has been the relation between youths and political actors prior to independence and to date? Why do politicians discard these youths after attaining their political feat?

Providing answers to these questions becomes crucial for a number of reasons. First, Nigeria has been bedevilled with violence and other forms of protests that were either ignited or perpetrated by the youths; and in most cases, they form the largest percentage of victims in such protests. Second, these youths constitute a large proportion of the population of Nigeria and there appears to be a gap between them and the political class in terms of participation in political activities. And finally, the underlining theme of these protests and violent activities has been that of neglect and poor governance. A discourse that centres on how these youngsters are engaged and disengaged before and after elections thus becomes crucial. This is geared towards addressing the myriads of issues surrounding youths in Nigeria. Finally, various countries in Africa have experienced decades of unhindered democratic rule in recent times, investigating the dynamics of relations between the policy makers and the youths within the continent becomes important as one of the tools for ensuring smooth democratic practises that carry all and sundry along. The article depends on a review of secondary sources related to the subject matter in addressing the issues raised in the present paper. The article is also hinged on Gurr's (1970:27) theory on Relative Deprivation and on other approaches.

Youths: Why are They Lending in their Voices through Violence?

Youths in Africa are unique due to their experiences and population. They constitute the majority of the population in the continent, which of course make them visible (Honwana and Boeck 2005; Omotosho and Omotosho 2016), and occupy a strategic position within the socio-economic and cultural spaces of Africa (Omotosho 2016:96). Consequently, they are regarded as the promise of the future and if not properly managed could constitute a threat (Argenti 2002). According to the UN General Assembly (1996) youths refer to individuals between ages 15 and 24; this definition is however not legally binding on other African states. The African Union (AU) defines youth as every person between the ages of 15 to 35. The definition of the AU used to be the categorisation in Nigeria until it was changed in 2019 to 15–29 years (National Youth Policy (AYP) 2001). Beyond the age categorisation, the definition of a youth is a function of social, cultural and economic prescription of the society in focus. Youths constitute 18 percent of the world population, 85 percent of which live in developing countries. The experiences of youths in Africa have further become peculiar due to a number of challenges they face usually in the areas of exclusion and poverty (Omotosho 2015).

Violence, no doubt, is a regular phenomenon associated with youths in the continent. The UN Report by the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change points to youth as a threat to security and myriads of literature have sprung up in this regard (The World Bank 1999, 2004). The reason why youths are lending in their voices through violence is due to their neglect in Nigeria and elsewhere; Honwana and DeBoeck's (2005) description of youths in Africa and Gurr's Relative Deprivation theory readily come to mind considering their description of the nature of young people and violence among humans respectively. In Honwana and DeBoeck's (2005) description of African youths, these scholars argued that youths are critical of the institutions and practices that are taken for granted by the adults. Secondly, they have the ability to "make" the society they find themselves; they see the "distorted environment" as the type that must be remodelled. Thirdly, in the process of making their environment, they also become villains or what Biaya (2005) described as breakers. Gurr's (1970:27) work on Relative Deprivation as a major cause of violence further assists in providing some theoretical inspiration for this discourse. Relative deprivation "is defined as actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities" (Gurr 1970: 24). It is the gap between that "to which people believe they are rightfully entitled" and that which "they think they are capable of getting and keeping" (Gurr 1970: 24). Deprivation occurs when an individual is not able to get what he or she feels he or she ought to have or deserve. Generally, we strive to achieve our desires and aims but are often unable to meet them and this could be due to different factors. This may lead to frustrations-blockage of ones' desires or goals (Gurr 1970). Frustration does not necessarily induce violence; it is the anger induced by frustration that brings about aggression. Consequently, individuals experiencing frustration have the innate tendency to engage in violence based on the intensity of their frustration (Gurr 1970).

Gurr propounded the frustration-aggression theory which contends that the human capacity for violence is hinged on the frustration-aggression mechanism. Frustration according to Gurr does not necessarily lead to violence; when it is protracted and hardly expressed, the end product is anger and ultimately violence. From his research on aggression, he submitted that frustration-aggression is the "primary source of the human capacity for violence" (Gurr 1970). Although aggression is neither essential nor satisfactory evidence of violent behaviour, he opined that frustration plays a strong role in influencing it (Gurr 1970). Thus, Relative Deprivation is the inconsistency amongst what people think they merit and what

they essentially reason they can get; it is the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the “ought” and the “is” of collective value satisfaction, and that disposes men to violence (Gurr 1970: 23). Gurr however was also quick to point out that an absolute source of political violence may not be possible; other variables predict the use of violence, namely the culture, the society, and the political environment of the actors. Once there is a significant discrepancy between what youths feel they should get and what they actually get, violence will likely occur. Consequent upon youths’ discontent with the polity, violence therefore becomes a display of frustration against politicians who use them during elections (Gurr 1970: 9; Obadare 1999: 6), coupled with factors inherent within the system in which the victim operates in.

The Relative Deprivation theory is relevant in this discourse. It explains the nature of youths and their perception of the society they find themselves in and how they have become frustrated within the society. The political elites have played active roles in breeding violence among young people. Studies have dealt extensively on the roles of elites in violence. Some of the tools they utilise include the imposition of candidates by party leadership, the use of hate speeches during electioneering campaigns by political elites, a poor implementation of electoral regulatory laws strengthens recidivism, the manipulation of election process, the violation of electoral rules, the use of security forces and hooligans (mostly youths) to intimidate voters, the corruption and money politics, the making of empty promises to youths and others. Interestingly, through their actions and inactions youths have short-changed themselves within the political domain. The evidences of young people’s nature and their perception cum frustration within the continent of Africa and elsewhere pervade the literature (Richards 1996; Onuoha 2014; Oteng-Ababio 2016; Ismail and Olonisakin 2021). Many youths have lost their lives while some have become hardened criminals constituting a serious threat to the well-being of the societies involved (Ismail and Olonisakin 2021). The primary reason for violent clashes hinges on structural injustices that have led to their marginalisation. Another issue which might interest us is that youths in some cases consider themselves to be pushed or coerced into some actions by structures they are surrounded with and which they have little or no control over. Some of these structures include family, education, religions, war, past experiences, social and economic challenges (Dawes and Honwana 1999; Honwana 1999; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998).

Causal and contributory factors to violence are multifaceted and they operate at different levels, namely individual, familial and community levels with other influences from peers at different stages (Rutter, Giller and Hagell

1998). Consequently, pinning a single factor on it might be unrealistic. Discontent is a function of many factors; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) approach provides an analysis of this scenario in his explanation of violence among youths. Studies have examined violence across cultures from microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem and Bronfenbrenner (1979) towed this path in his analysis of youth violence. At the microsystem level, which is the focus of the present discourse, the scholar attributed socio-economic factors and attitudes ideologies of culture. As regards the socio-economic factors, poverty and the perceived gaps between the rich and the poor constitute the predisposing factor to violence. While explaining familial factors Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, Harachi and Cothorn (2000) argue that violence activities are likely to be on the rise when the majority of the family members in a neighbourhood are poor. Studies have associated community social disorganisation with neighbourhood poverty as it is often challenging for them to relocate to a better neighbourhood (Sampson 1991; Sampson 1993; Sampson and Lauritsen 1994), although this is bound to have greater influence in a country with high levels of poverty (Van der Merwe and Dawes 2000). Families are likely to be rich or otherwise based on the opportunities that exist for them in gainful employment. In Nigeria, unemployment and poverty are two of the major socio-economic challenges affecting its economy. The estimated youth unemployment rate in Nigeria as of 2021 was at almost 19.61 percent (Statista 2021). The National Bureau of Statistics analysed the population of unemployed in Nigeria during the last quarter of 2020 (Q4 2020) at 33.3 percent, an increase of 6.2 per cent compared with the 27.1 percent of the second quarter of 2020 (National Bureaus of Statistics 2020). This places Nigeria in the number three position among nations with the highest number of unemployed people globally. The World Poverty Clock also submitted that the number of people living in extreme poverty in Nigeria was 86.9 million in 2018 and rose to 93.7 million in 2019, thus placing the nation as the highest number of people with extreme poverty globally (Punch 2022). The data further submitted that an estimated 120 million Nigerians are expected to slide into extreme poverty by 2030. The perceived gap between the rich and the poor also plays a strong role. Studies have associated income inequality and violent crime (Sampson 1991). Wood (2005) found an association between income inequality and unemployment among male youths as contributors to non-state violence. In Nigeria, the gap between the rich and the poor is high. The income inequality for the top ten percent to the bottom fifty percent is 1 to 14; also, income inequality between the top 1% to the bottom 50% is 1 to 37. The implication is that a single person's income in the population will pay

for fourteen persons in the bottom 50 percent while one person's income will pay for thirty-seven persons in the bottom 50 percent respectively (Dataphyte 2022). The poor often justify their violent behaviour based on the perceived affluence of the rich and the inequality between them.

The attitude and ideologies of the culture were also identified as determinant of violent behaviours. States often emphasise anti-violence activities but in real terms they do the opposite (Van der Merwe and Dawes 2000). Political actors often see violence as instrument of winning election and cowering their opponents. However, upon winning, they put up a façade of peace as enshrined in the constitution. Nigeria appears to exhibit a culture of violence between the youths and the elites (some of the factors have been identified earlier). The nation has begun to witness violence at its wake of independence and it has served as a barrier to its national development (Ibok and Ogar 2018; Igwe and Amadi 2021). The 2017 Afrobarometer data demonstrates that about one in four Nigerians (26%) practiced at least one form of political violence in the last two years, vacillating from 23% in Northern Nigeria to 28% in the South. The most common form was violence at political campaigns/rallies (18%), followed by violence at a protest (14%) and violence by extremists (11%).

Youths and Political Violence in Nigeria

The argument above on why youths are lending in their voice through violence is still relevant here. Young ones have been frustrated and angered within the political domain, hence they perpetrate myriads of violence. Of course, many of the political violence perpetrated by the youths and reported in this section are not solely due to marginalisation. They are a combination of several factors. Series of protests (peaceful and otherwise) have been staged by youths to express their dissatisfaction regarding the state of the nation, governance and their plights as youths. However, the government and its agencies have displayed a non-challant attitude to their plights. Historically, there are two sides to political violence by youths in the country, though a clear-cut separation between the duos might be impossible. The first has to do with the use of youths by the politicians for election purposes while the second has to do with the reaction of the youths against manipulation and governance.

Violence appears to be as old as Nigeria itself. This is because from the onset the delineation and governance structure of the country bothered on primordial sentiments under the system of indirect rule (United States

Institute of Peace 2010; Fund for Peace 2018). These divisions marked the beginning of discontent and violence. As far back as 1940s, these splits have sparked off political violence and became heightened around independence (Fund for Peace 2018). The foundations of politics along ethnicity and other divides set during the colonial era eventually ignited violence in the 1960s. Rivalry between the north and the south became intensified, resulting in violent protests popularly referred to as *operation wetie* (arson) in 1962 (Fund for Peace 2018). In addition, the clash among political parties in that period, alleged voting irregularities surrounding the 1964 election coupled with the fall out of the 1962 political crisis fuelled another violent protest, killing no less than two thousand people (Fund for Peace 2018). The violence continued to spread across different parts of the country (Vickers, 1970; Fund for Peace 2018), leading to a military coup tainted with ethnic coloration (Siollun 2009; Vickers 1970) in 1965–1966. The fallout of this was a civil war that led to loss of lives and properties (Black Past 2009; Omaka 2014). It was reported that no fewer than a million people lost their lives in the war (Heerten and Moses 2014).

Eventually, the civil war and nine years of military rule ended and the second republic of 1979 was ushered in. Notwithstanding the harsh experiences of civil war and military dictatorship after independence, violence was still a major identifying feature of the second republic. The challenges of corruption, ethnicity, and other encounters like the Niger delta crisis emerged (Fund for Peace 2018). Electoral malpractices, the failure to stand by the zoning arrangement agreed to within the coalition party in which the north failed to support the southern candidate further fuelled violence in 1983 (Hart 1993; Wright 1984). The 1983 election also came up with a series of manipulation and youths were used by the politicians to carry out violent electoral malpractices. As a matter of fact, the 1983 election was considered the worst form of electoral violence in Nigeria (Agbaje et al. 2004). Eventually, this event ushered in more years of military rule.

The third republic, which began in 1993, was short-lived as a military coup also took place and suppressed the masses' basic freedoms of speech. Though the 1993 election was supposed to have been the best in the history of election in the country, the annulment of the election by the military junta led to a period of serious violence fuelled by ethnic and religious sentiments. Notwithstanding, violence in this period was minimal compared to other periods. The military junta was able to suppress the voices of the people with decrees and prevented people from expressing their desire to transit to civilian rule (Fund for Peace, 2018). The fourth republic arose in 1999

with varying degrees of violence across all levels of the government. Apart from the violence experienced in the first republic, that of the fourth republic was considered the worst in terms of magnitude, dimension and consistency. Political violence erupted along religious, ethnic and perpetuity in government (Agbese 1990). While political participation was low, unrest from politics was very high (Suberu 2009). The dimension of the violence in 2003 was such that youths were being armed for political strength, intimidation, and protection (Fund for Peace 2018). The implication on the proliferation of arms and the growth of militancy and a higher level of violence were evident in subsequent elections (Small Arms Survey 2007). Consequently, several lives were lost in the process (Small Arms Survey 2007) as voters cried out against all forms of election fraud (Human Rights Watch 2014). Fund for Peace (2018) noted the failure of the international communities to condemn the act as another major setback to the election.

The situation repeated itself in the 2007 election as there was a high incidence of vote rigging, theft of ballot boxes, intimidation of voters and hooliganism such that it was termed as the worst election by international observers (Cable News Network 2011). Some of the key areas in which youths have been used between the 1999 and 2008 election periods include multiple registrations across registration centres, molestation of the voters and electorates, hijacking of ballot boxes, kidnapping of electoral officers (Agbaje et al. 2004: 9) and, interestingly, elections appeared to question the credibility of democracy in the country. Human Rights Watch, (2004: 1) submitted that no less than 300 people were killed in the 2007 violent elections. Debrah, Kojo Pumpuni and Gyimah-Boadi (2010) analysed the election and submitted that what politicians did was simply to begin the election process through political and constitutional engineering with the aim of engendering a peaceful election and that the primary motive was usually to organise the election in their favour. Jega (2007: 249) further captured this scenario around campaign pettiness, intolerance, and a violation of the electoral process whether deliberately or otherwise.

The spate of violence climaxed during the 2011 election as it was termed one of the worst outbreaks of violence in the history of the country's politics (Fund for Peace 2018). This was caused by the loss of Muhammadu Buhari to another opponent during the election. The cause of the violence was also attributed to the failure of the north and south political parties to keep with the agreement of power rotation between the north and the south. Apart from that, the tension was high in this period because the nation was experiencing violence along religious and ethnic lines. The case of boko

haram, Jos crisis and other forms of ethno-religious crisis were on the rise. This spate of killings continued till the 2015 election even if the election was peaceful compared to the previous elections. The peaceful election process experienced in the 2015 election was not repeated in 2019 as there were recorded cases of election fraud, rigging, and various forms of violence leading to the loss of lives and of properties. It was reported that 626 people were killed in the process, which began in 2018. The election was said to have contributed to the general insecurity of the country (Human Right Watch 2019). Other forms of violence include violence against the annulment of the June 12 election; protests against bad governance, insecurity and police brutality. The primary reason for the violent clashes is hinged on structural injustices leading to the marginalisation of the region, which is the major oil producer in the country. This has led to environmental damage, poverty and the deprivation of the means of livelihood of the affected region.

Other Forms of Violence

In the same vein, history is replete with a series of youth-led violence against government agencies or political office holders in Nigeria. Prior to independence, a number of protests were led by young people and supported by various age groups and professions, namely market women, traders and artisans pervaded the country. Some of the agitations were in response to unfavourable tax policies, improved welfare, oppressive regimes, the fair right to life, the right to be heard and the right to basic amenities. For instance, students from the University of Ibadan and of Yaba Polytechnic disrupted parliament with the aim of preventing parliament from approving an Anglo-Nigeria defence act which was enforced by the British government as a condition for granting Nigeria independence (Chukuezi 2009) at the wake of independence; there was political violence in the then western region leading to the military coups of 1966 (Crowder 1978).

After independence, these agitations continued. Even though the nation experienced long years of military rule that began at the wake of independence, this did not hinder the youths from staging their discontent with the government and its agencies. The “Ali Must Go” crisis that stunned the country in 1978 is still fresh in ones’ memory. The slogan “Ali Must Go” was implemented against the then Federal Commissioner of Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali, during the General Olusegun Obasanjo military regime (Guardian 2020). The SAP riot of 1989, a major protest across Nigeria, was also spearheaded by young people. The protest was against

international policies being adopted by the government, which the youths felt was against the masses. The June 12 crisis cannot be forgotten either, as scores of youths protested against the military junta due to the cancellation of the June 12 general elections.

Other forms of violence perpetrated by youths also include the Niger delta crises against the government, leading to the creation of different militant groups; others include the Boko Haram sect, which began around 2009. The most recent one in the country was the end-SARS protest against police brutality but eventually metamorphosed into protests against bad governance in the largest mass demonstrations. The protest, which occurred in 2020, gathered many youths across Nigeria in Lekki Lagos and different parts of the country.

Political office holders at the state and local levels were not left out; youths have staged series of protests against many of them based on their failure to deliver on their promises or using them for political benefits. The youths in Akwa Ibom state, south Nigeria, staged a protests against their former state governor whom they accused of maladministration, preference for thuggery, and interference in Ondo state; youths from southwest Nigeria also protested against a former governor whom they accused of embezzling the funds; youths in Kaduna state, northern Nigeria accused the governor of failing to empower them; the former governor of Kwara state, north central Nigeria, was accused of using the youths for political and selfish gains.

Youths and Political Participation in Nigeria

The discussion in this section will be divided in two: the colonial era and after independence. A major feature of politics as it concerns youths in these periods relates to marginalisation, although the experience of youths within politics during the colonial era appears to be slightly different from what took place after independence. During the colonial era, indigenous political participation in elective positions was just evolving; consequently, a class consciousness of youths' disadvantaged position had not become institutionalised. Also, age categorisations during the colonial society and today are not the same. Culture, rather than the modern definition (18-35/15-29 years) appeared to determine to a large extent who a youth was and this reflected in the composition of the category youth. In traditional age grade societies, for instance, a man could be regarded as a youth till age 40. This, to an extent, served as justification for the domination of non-youths in elective positions. For instance, the National

Youth Movement, a political party that captured the interests of youths in politics during the colonial era, was dominated by “youths” in their late 40s. Apart from this, young people at one point or the other during the colonial era and towards independence played key roles within elective positions which appears lacking in contemporary times. A quantum of youths were politically active, occupying important political positions before and after the elections. For instance, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was 34 when he was first elected into the Northern House of Assembly and 37 years when he became a law maker. He became a prime minister at age 45. Maitama Sule, in 1955–1956, was the Chief Whip of the Federal House of Representatives at age 26. Still from the north, the former president of Nigeria, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, became the parliamentary secretary at age 33 in 1958 and a minister before turning 40. The same can be said of Anthony Enahoro, who was only 27 years when he led the struggle for the independence of Nigeria; Obafemi Awolowo was 37 years when he came into political limelight, while Matthew Tawo Mbu was Federal Minister of Labour between 1953 and 1954 at the age of 23, thus becoming the youngest minister ever. This was the scenario for many of them in this period as they were in their late 20s and early 30s. In spite of their marginalisation in this period, the few of them who had the opportunity to be politically active and occupy elective positions made impacts, which appears to be lacking in contemporary times.

Much later (after independence), a formal recognition of youths as falling in the prescribed age group (18–35 years) became more pronounced; consequently, programs and policies targeted at youths became entrenched. However, this development still did not reflect in the composition of decision makers and key actors within the political class. Rather, the global recognition of young people as a force to reckon with further opened the eyes of the political elites to their worth as tools for winning elections and for perpetuating their stay in power. It also brought to the limelight the disadvantaged position youths found themselves in, which was hidden during the colonial era and during independence. Aside the military era, in which youths played active roles, coupled with a brief interjection of democratic dispensation which saw a large number of youths in the House of Representatives, the representation of youths in the corridor of decision making dropped sharply. Political actors within the age range of forties and fifties became the “young people” and were seen as representing youths.

After independence, the meagre progress experienced regarding the active participation of youths became halted. Violence and various forms of electoral malpractices that characterised many of the elections in the

wake of independence, and in which youths played active roles, marred the smooth progress being experienced regarding youths' participation in politics. The effects of a military overthrow resulted in thirteen years of military rule and this stalled the process of youths' involvement in electoral politics, which had been initiated during the colonial era. Upon the return of power to the civilians in 1979, many of the surviving youths in politics at independence, who were no longer young at that period, came on board with other new entrants. Many of these political elites, who were supposed to provide mentorship for the youths at that period, did not do so; rather, they were preoccupied with their selfish political ambitions which were terminated by civil war and the long era of military dictatorship. Thus, the political participation of youths revolved around hooliganism, the theft of ballot boxes, being an agent of multiple voting, and the rest.

Consequently, the participation of youths in electoral politics became almost extinct in this period. For instance, during the Shagari led government of 1979–1983, out of about 24 ministers appointed as federal ministers, only one was clearly under age 35 in the person of Bello Maitama Yusuf serving as the Minister of internal Affairs. The majority of them were in their mid-forties and fifties. At the governorship level, none of the appointed governors was a youth as well. Many of the candidates were returned to their formal offices during the 1983 election and by implication the roles of youths in elective positions became minimal. Young people became tools for winning election rather than being active participants in political machinations. Cases of violence and youths' involvement clearly attests to this. The youths were visible in the areas of violence and election rigging (Osumah 2010). Osumah captured youths' involvement in politics prior to 2015 as a reflection of the “assumption of the traditional doom theory of youth bulge, youth in crisis or lumpen youth culture” (Osumah 2016: 11). There was an improvement in the level of youth participation in elective offices after 2015. Reports from civil societies indicated a significant improvement in the level of participation. For instance, 10 percent of senate members in 2015 were youths (Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement, YIAGA 2019); while 18 percent of members of the Federal House of Representatives were also youths. In 2019, the percentage increased further as 27.4 percent members of the Federal House of Representatives were youths while 13.5 percent were youths in the senate. For the state House of Assembly, 41.8 percent were youths (YIAGA 2019). In recent times, youths have become active in election-related matters but they are less active during voting. Between the 1999 and 2012 elections, for instance, there were political activities like campaigns, participation in ad hoc

jobs for the electoral bodies, and political parties by the youths. Social media were agog with youths' presence but not with the actual voting. The reason was simple; young people were more comfortable participating in politics in their rooms and on their phone key pads than in actual participation. In spite of youth massive engagements in voter education and political mobilisation and election management (Report on the 2011 General Elections 2013; Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement, YIAGA 2014), their involvement in voting was very low (Youth Candidacy Report 2015). By implication, young people have not asserted their presence in voting like they have done in other areas, and election is a game of numbers brought about by voting. The assumption has often been that of neglect and lack of opportunities from the political elites.

However, we must state that the 2023 general election marked an increase in the level of participation of youths in politics, especially in elections in Nigeria. Taking the three cycles of election into consideration, namely, pre-election, election, and post-election, the roles and participation of youths cannot be ignored. Prior to election, young people served as volunteers with the Independent National Electoral Commission in the process of voters' registration between 2021 and 2022; aside this, young people, mostly youth service corps members, served as registration officers and party agents. During the election period, a number of youths contested for election based on the "Not-Too-Young-To-Rule" policy which enabled young people to contest for various political offices in Nigeria. Consequently, many youths were nominated by their parties in many political offices like the state House of Assembly and the House of Representatives. Apart from this, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has revealed that youths (18-34) had the highest demography on the National Register of Voters. The post-election era has also shown the commitment of youths as many of them have been engaged in online activities. Interestingly, quite a number of these youths emerged as winners in the elections.

Why do Politicians Discard these Youths after Attaining their Political Feat?

Interrogating why youths' relevance within the political domain and decision making diminish after election becomes interesting in the present section. Though some of the factors came up while exploring the activities of youths within the political domain in the above section, a further discussion of why young people are usually discarded as soon as politicians attain their

political feat becomes the focus here. Young people's low involvement in voting over time cannot be ruled out as one of the factors responsible for this. Until recently, the levels of participation of youths either as managers of voting activities or as voters were lacking. Their level of involvement may signal to the political elite that their attainment of victory in election as politicians is not dependent on their inputs. Politics is a game of numbers and allegiance of the political elite to the electorates is usually tilted towards the loyal voters. Other factors which make it easy for the political elites to discard these youths include the absence of youth platforms within political parties, which could have applied pressure on the leaderships on their behalf. Available youth platforms are usually occupied by adults as the position has become political. Consequently, providing the needed leadership and mentorship for these youths were absent in many of these political parties. Youths within the parties only serve as foot soldiers without a well laid-out structure for socialising them into the decision-making process.

Apart from this, the tokenistic approach of political parties in the country has further eaten deep into the system, to the extent that youth and students' associations are becoming an appendage of political parties. In addition, the dearth of strategic youth organising platforms within the political parties played a crucial role. Structures that should mobilise the youths for pre- and post-election related activities and which should be situated within these platforms are deficient. For instance, internal structures geared towards mounting pressures on the youths through advocacy and other youth-led initiatives for eliminating apathy to voting and on the political elites were equally absent (YIAGA 2014). These factors become even more accentuated through corruption and cultural factors. Young ones who had access to the political elites within the political parties could not achieve much as they have become satisfied with hand-outs from the political elites. This is further reinforced through the "wait for your turn," "respect the leaders" norms pervading the parties. Consequently, their quest for political involvement becomes frustrated and may be culminating into violence.

Related to the above are the socio-economic challenges bedevilling the nation as a result of poor governance and policy, which have impacted negatively on the nation's economy. Socio-economic factors, political culture and institutional perspectives, and the Index Multiple Deprivation theory revised by Oxford University further become relevant in explaining this. The perspective argued that higher income, right values and attitudes coupled with education make citizens to become more active in political processes (Wie, Powell and Prewitt 1969; Conway 1991; Nagel 1987; Almond and Verba 1963; Brady, Verba

and Schlozman 1995). One of the determinants of political participation as highlighted by this perspective is education and Nigeria needs to be up and doing in this regard. The educational sector is faced with the challenges of funding and this has created other hitches ranging from incessant strikes, brain drain, and quality challenges. The high rate of unemployment among the Nigerian university graduates can also be traced to the imbalance between labour market demands and the lack of essential skills of the university graduates (Dabale, Oni and Adekola 2000). This has an implication on the knowledge base and skills of the youths (Oviawe 2010). Presently, graduates are produced under a very difficult and less conducive academic environment. Still, there are plethora of those who did graduate and have no jobs. Awogbenle and Iwuamadi (2010) have shown that Nigeria has a youth population of 80 million – 60% of the total population of Nigeria. Further, 64 million are unemployed while 1.6 million are under-employed. A further breakdown shows that 40% of the unemployed are aged 20 to 24 years; 31% are aged 15 to 19 years. Quoting Okafor (2011: 365), “the ruling (political) class failed because they replaced the vision, policy and strategy, which should be the thrust of every leadership with transaction.” Each successive government took turn to prey on the nation’s wealth by using political power, resources, good will, utilities instrument of abuse, oil personal gains (Okafor 2005: 28; 2011: 365). The implication is that youths have become impoverished mentally and financially and are at the mercy of the politicians. Thus, being on the beck and call of the political elites for different vices becomes convenient for them. Fighting for their rights and making plans to upturn the unfavourable status quo thus becomes very challenging. For some of the youths, the election period constitutes a harvest period to meet some of their immediate needs. However, the pittance received for service rendered is not commensurate with the havoc politicians cause on the youths and the citizenry in the long run.

Some of the issues highlighted above further become heightened by the importance attached to immediate gratification as against the traditional value of patience and hard work on the part of the youths and political elites. Young people enticed with peanuts as gratification for corrupt deals are silenced throughout the tenure of the political elite. The inordinate ambition of many youths to amass wealth has equally made them tools in the hands of the elites. Consequently, youths have become undermined and the political elites appear to cash in on this. Various cases of youth engagement for political gains of the elites attest to this. In the 2003–2007 general election in Rivers state, Nigeria, for example, Human Rights Watch (2007: 81) gave examples of how youths were engaged during the election to perpetrate

violent activities. One of the group leaders confessed of financial rewards in return for election rigging for the then governor of the state (HRW, 2007: 81). In a report by HRW in the 2003 polls, community leaders, civil societies, and residents argued that youths were instruments utilised by political parties to rig election “by stealing and stuffing ballot boxes, chasing away voters and intimidating the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Officials” (Moveh 2009: 14). In other situations, youths were provided with cash rewards and gifts for voting during election. Youths are usually relevant prior to the elections and discarded afterwards. Some of these issues make it easy for the political elites to discard the youths after attaining their political feats. Notwithstanding, there have been various mechanisms put in place to encourage youth participation and some of them are considered below.

Mechanisms for Youth Participation in Politics or Electoral Process in Nigeria

In spite of the marginalisation of youths, structures and policy documents supporting youths abound in the country. For instance, Nigeria is a signatory to the African Youth Charter (2006) that clearly explains the role of youths in all spheres of life. Like other documents of the African Union, most member states including Nigeria only ratified the documents without implementing them. In terms of youths’ policies in Nigeria, Nigeria without doubt has a well-developed policy that specifically addresses the plight of youths, and four editions of youth policies have so far been rolled out since 1981. Before this period, several attempts were aimed at protecting youths through programmes and schemes. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) was set up to address a number of issues among which was the development of Nigerian youths. Notwithstanding the formulation of the youth policy in 1981, the period marked the beginning of a turnaround on matters relating to youths. In the mission statement of the policy, it was stipulated that young women and men should not be seen as a problem but as a force for change. In keeping within this perspective, the National Youth Policy should be viewed not so much as a means of addressing problems associated with young people but as a means of ensuring their participation in the building of their community and societies (National Youth Policy 2001).

Recently, the National Youth Policy was revised and the document acknowledges the exclusion of youths from participating in politics. The revised edition also brings to the fore ways by which youths can be

encouraged to participate in politics. The policy noted that achieving this would be difficult for the youths if proper structures are not put in place. Some of the structures put in place by the policy includes political engagement through training and mentorship and the promotion of leadership skills for governance (National Youth Policy 2001). In addition, the policy has emphasised on strengthening the capacity of youth-led organisations and harnessing their potentials with the aim of serving appropriately in youth advocacy and capacity building for engagement in politics and governance (National Youth Policy 2001). Moreover, the passage of the “Not Too Young to Run” bill of 31 May 2018 by the National Assembly is one of the policy statements showing the commitment of the nation to ensuring that young people are involved. Currently, the minimum age for vying for the House of Assembly and the House of Representatives has been reduced from 30 to 25 years while that of Senate and Governorship is now from 35 to 30 years, and the age for contesting for the office of the president has been reduced from 40 to 30. All these constitute steps in the right direction regarding the inclusion of youths in politics in the country.

At the institutional level, some laudable steps were equally taken. The nation through its electoral commission has taken giant steps regarding the management of election and citizens’ involvement. This of course is due to the inputs of the media and non-state actors. The autonomy granted the independent electoral commission further impacted on the programs and policies that affect young people. The Independent National Electoral Commission has been able to engage young people at all levels with the aim of encouraging participation in politics (INEC 2015a). Civic education clubs were established in high schools and were aimed at educating young people, especially first-time voters (INEC 2015b). Apart from this, a number of youths were equally appointed as INEC youth ambassadors in partnership with non-state actors for education and awareness purposes to other youths (INEC 2015b). Moreover, consultative meetings, trainings and campaigns were embarked upon with young people. In addition, INEC has encouraged the inclusion of young people as election managers working as registrants at the polling units, collation officers and observers (INEC 2015b).

While it may be too early to begin an assessment of the revised policy on youths and other innovations, an assessment of the existing policies is nothing to write home about in terms of implementation. One of the challenges confronted by the country regarding policies is implementation.

Concluding Remarks: Harnessing Youth Potentials as Panacea against Political Violence

The present article has explored the inclusion-exclusion cycle youths have been engaged in before and after elections and its implication on violence. The research indicates that the relationship existing between youths and political elites has always been in favour of the latter. Violence and youths' exclusion may not cease until there is a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of the political elites to ensure that youths are invited to contribute meaningfully to the political development of the country. In light of this, one of the issues that needs to be addressed is poverty. A large proportion of youth live below poverty line. This condition, further fuelled by unemployment, has pushed the youth into vices like alcoholism and criminal activities. Human Right Watch (2007: 81) attributed poverty as one of the reasons why youths engage in electoral violence in Nigeria. Addressing poverty through the meaningful engagement of these youths may reduce the attraction for hooliganism, political violence, and other social vices. Youths detest idleness; they will adopt any available means to get themselves engaged no matter how decent or indecent it may be.

The proper engagement of the youth at all levels of society is important as well. Prior to colonialism, different age-sets across societies in Nigeria belonged to the age set/grade, which was loaded with responsibilities and obligations. There is a need to engage the young ones in meaningful communal activities at the neighbourhood, community, and state levels. This will prepare them to be responsible youths and adults as the case may be. Roles are learned, and it therefore becomes important to create the proper atmosphere for meaningful learning. While this process was recently initiated by INEC, these initiatives were unknown to many of the youths. A more deliberate attempt should be made in this regard in terms of spread and collaborations.

One of the challenges youths face in general is the perception and reaction of the community towards them. Youths are often regarded as problems to be solved rather than being seen, admired, and involved in development processes. It becomes important for the political leaders to adopt a change of attitude towards these youths. Socialising these youngsters into political activities and engaging them meaningfully across relevant decision-making platforms may go a long way in addressing some of these challenges. As earlier argued, until recently, most places where youths have featured prominently in political spaces have been in the area of violence, voting, and kidnapping.

Proper engagement will help identify and utilise their potentials toward the development of the country. Equally, the agents of the state, namely the police, are often hostile to some of the youths based on the perceived notion of criminality among them. Youths are harassed and terrorised often on the assumption that they are all law breakers. These narratives needs to change through a well-established interaction between the duos.

Young people should be ready to assert themselves in non-violent ways. The state has set in motion several structures aimed at engaging them. Therefore, young people may need to latch on these opportunities and where there are issues, they can draw the attention of the stakeholders to take necessary action. In the last political dispensation, many youths were said to be only politically active on social media but absent during voting. This description has to change; they have the responsibility of ensuring that they are not dissuaded by immediate gratifications and equally learn to follow up on their thoughts and actions. Developing youth potentials should therefore begin with an understanding of what youths can do in terms of their abilities and capabilities. A lot of unrest being witnessed among young ones these days stemmed from a lack of understanding regarding youths in Nigeria. Youths can make and mar their environment. Therefore, attention needs to be concentrated on ensuring that these youngsters contribute positively to the development of the country.

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