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## African Youth Integration In Politics

While African youths have always been very visible and vocal in their pursuit of political change, they have largely failed to integrate into the party politics that currently dominate the continent. This problem is aggravated by a gerontic political class, that lacks the motivation to address the challenges of the future. Additionally, legal dispositions pose obstacles to the political participation of young people in many African countries. The resulting underrepresentation has caused distrust and non-involvement in politics that constitutes an additional threat for future developments on the continent. It is important for Africa to allow its youth to help shape their own destiny and political integration would be an important step in that direction.

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# AFRICAN YOUTH INTEGRATION IN POLITICS

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From the independence period until 2017, starting with the Gambian political crisis, the African youth (<30 years old) has been a crucial driving force behind the political and social changes across the continent. It has always been visible and its partaking in demonstrations and popular uprisings have on many occasions decided if a political regime was to survive or be toppled. Nonetheless, discussions on African politics focus mainly on the democratic dichotomy or the conflict between a small elite and large parts of the population. They largely fail to address the universality of the underrepresentation of youths on this youngest of continents.

Intriguingly, the continuous participation of the African youth in major political transformation processes on the continent has not translated into political activity with regards to participation in elections, involvement in political decision-making or holding representative offices. African youths are generally not well represented by their public officials and a wave of political apathy has been the result, harming the prospect for improvements in the future.

Within this context, three questions concerning the relationships between young people and politics arise: What are the major causes of the youth's non-

integration in formal politics despite their significant role in the political history of the African continent in terms of change? How does this underrepresentation manifest in the political sphere with regard to the important weight of the youth in winning elections? And finally, what kind of measures should be undertaken in order to overcome such underrepresentation of the major force for development in Africa? These three questions will be explored by analyzing the youth's presence in state institutions and by considering social as well as economic indicators. A small survey was conducted among youths from different African countries in order to shed further light on the issue.

## Outlining the Problem

While the ageing European continent has experienced a significant rejuvenation of its political class, the same cannot be said for Africa. This is all the more surprising given the abundance of young people on the continent. In terms of median age, the 20(!) youngest countries on the planet are located in Africa. In 2010, 70 percent of the African population was under 30 years old and slightly more than 20 per cent were between the ages of 15 to 24<sup>1</sup>. These figures are a result of high fertility rates and low life expectancy. According to the UN:

“In 2015, 226 million youth aged 15-24 lived in Africa, accounting for 19 per cent of the global youth population. By 2030, it is projected that the number of youth in Africa will have increased by 42 per cent. Africa’s youth population is expected to continue to grow throughout the remainder of the 21st century, more than doubling from current levels by 2055.”<sup>2</sup>

This is bound to be a test on the continent’s already struggling education systems and labour markets. In turn, this will be a huge political challenge and it remains to be seen if existing political structures will find successful ways to address the issue. Unfortunately, this appears unlikely given the continent’s tradition of long serving presidents, whose developmental track records are mediocre at best. Currently, seven of the ten longest serving (non-royal) heads of state hold office in African countries. In Angola, Uganda and Zimbabwe, 80 percent of the population was not yet born when the current president took office.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this amplifies a feeling of political impotence and highlights the disconnection between the young population and the ageing political leadership. It would appear that the African continent is still plagued by a gerontic political cast, which lacks the dynamism, moral integrity and creativity that the youth embodies and could contribute to the political landscape of the continent.

### **Reasons for Non-Integration in Political Decision-Making**

Nearly all African countries have known at some time in their evolution a

moment of instability that has either jeopardized (last North Mali crisis in 2012) or strengthened the functioning of their political institutions (Senegalese “Yen A Marre”-movement in 2011). The bolstering of institutions has enabled democratic consolidation, while languishing uncertainty (Libya in 2011, Burkina Faso political crisis in 2015) has created weak reigning institutions with regard to addressing populations’ needs and as a result mortgaged the social cohesion.

The relationship of the youth towards politics has not always been the same throughout African history. While the first wave of the African youth after the colonization was more likely to participate in political as well as non-political organizations (parties, associations, movements, syndicates ...), as exemplified by the Railwaymen Union across West Africa, the social fabric appears to have weakened across the continent. Today, there is a remarkable crisis that shapes the relationship between the under thirty-year-olds and the political arena dominated by their elders. The youth seems to lose the desire for integration in political parties, avoids taking part in elections as voter or candidate and most importantly refuses to support a political struggle within a legal organized structure.

Paradoxically, the young generation never fails to participate in major political uprisings whenever they happen in their respective countries, such as toppling a long-standing regime (revolution in Egypt, 2012), getting involved in demonstrations or occasionally marching for common grievances (labour, security, public

service, transparency, ...)⁴. However, they do so under the auspices of no particular legal formation. In this regard, one can quote the “FeesMustFall” movement in South Africa in 2015. This attitude reveals either a refusal of existing political parties by the young people or an exclusion of the youth from the formal political environment through legal tools or customary practices or both.



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Nonetheless, politics remains a recurring topic in youths’ debates and it is certainly the case that they always keep their eyes on the political evolution of their countries, even when abroad. This can be seen in their contribution (leading demonstrations, claiming civilian liberty, defending their community against armed forces...) as active citizens, for example in the political upheaval that happened in North Africa (as well as the Middle East) with the “Arab Spring” that started in Tunisia in 2011. Similar contributions are observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Burkina Faso, with the movement “Balai Citoyen” (citizens’ broom) in 2015, and very recently the Gambia, with the defeat of Yaya Jammeh in the December

2016 presidential elections, are two examples. This attitude of the youth is a direct aftermath of several factors that concurred to create a mindset of mistrust towards the political sphere.

Concerning behavior of the African youth in politics, the young generation can be divided into three categories on the basis of the dimension of their political ambition or involvement: political project carriers within a political party, political ambition feeders outside of any structure and young people with apolitical sight.

However, all three categories suffer to varying degrees from the same obstacles that prevent them from taking part in the decision-making process. First of all, there is a long existing tradition in African societies called gerontocracy according to which decisions belong to the elders. The youth’s participation is reduced to compliance. While political decision making is now located in modern political institutions (elective or nominated positions) rather than informal traditional structures, the traditional mindset on “decision makers” does not seem to have evolved at the same pace. Since Africa’s demographic renewal is faster than the renewal of the political generation, conflicts between old-aged political actors and the young generation have emerged. Young people who do participate in political structures suffer a lot from a lack of respect regarding their capacities to occupy key positions in their own parties.

Secondly, legal dispositions pose an obstacle in a majority of African countries. These have, for a long time, made it possible to keep the youth away from key political offices in favor of the

elders. For instance, the voting age may differ from the required age for being a candidate for an elective position. Further, if ever there is equality after the ballot count for competitive positions, the favor will be given to the older candidate.<sup>5</sup> While this is unlikely to often be the case, it demonstrates that legislation often favours the elder or incumbent. In Nigeria in 2015, Murtala Badaru's election was nullified<sup>6</sup> by the State and National Assembly Elections Petitions Tribunal in Minna (the Niger state capital) on the ground of not having reached 30 years of age.<sup>7</sup>

Only few countries have started to soften their legal framework in this regard. In the majority of African countries today the minimum age for MPs is set between 25 and 30 years. This is true mostly for French speaking countries<sup>8</sup>, while the others (English or Portuguese speaking countries) seem to be more eager to lower the eligibility conditions relative to the age. In South Africa, for example, the passive suffrage in parliamentary elections is fixed at 18<sup>9</sup>, in Zambia at 21<sup>10</sup>, and at 23 in Tunisia<sup>11</sup> and in Morocco<sup>12</sup> respectively. If there are some legal efforts to promote the youth's integration in politics, under no circumstances should one ignore that these legal provisions do constitute obstacles for young people.

In addition, the youth no longer believes in the current political class, now that the heroes of independence have faded. The results of a survey conducted in March 2017, questioning 82 young people of different African countries, reveal that 71.6 percent of those surveyed have never voted, 46.9 percent of them estimate that their interests are not or only insufficiently

taken into consideration in the political programs and 38.3 percent of the surveyed said that their claims are totally excluded from political priorities.<sup>13</sup> These factors lead to a continuous discouragement of young people to participate in politics.

As the medium age of African populations is under 30 years<sup>14</sup>, political actors have understood that the youth's potential in winning elections cannot be neglected any more. Therefore, both the youth and well-established political actors try to benefit from each other: youths offer their votes and politicians provide short-term benefits. A study on Uganda's political arena in 2016 reveals, "youth demographic dominance is used to champion the interests of particular dominant elites with no or little response to youth issues".<sup>15</sup> In this bargaining perspective voting motivations of the youth is not driven by what is good for the future of the country, but only by maximizing short-term personal profit. Therefore, it contrasts with the competitive spirit of elections which should ideally be based on choosing the most suitable and competent candidate.

For a long time, youths have faced problems resulting from political decisions taken on their behalf while excluding them from the process. Statistics from the conducted survey further confirm the non-integration of the youth in politics, which is in part the young people's own responsibility. Most young people's rejection of politics might be understandable, but not justifiable. Among those surveyed 43.9 percent are not interested in politics, while 24.4 percent remain undecided.

Only 31.7 percent of the respondents have political ambitions. For a majority of youths, politics is the affair of corrupt and immoral people. An unfair system of justice, which the youth faces powerlessly, in addition to recurrent structural problems, due to an ineffective educational system and the lack of job creation policies, reinforce this assumption. These perceptions are confirmed by the results of a study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on the youth's engagement in politics in Cameroon in 2011.

Recently, given the limited possibilities in public employment, young people are forced to create their own business instead of working as employees. Therefore, they face additional difficulties in obtaining funds from financial institutions due to a lack of warranty or valuable mortgage. The restrictive compulsory procedures in accessing funds are often connected to decision makers who fear interference in their own economic activities. According to Mr. Diouf Ibrahima, the director of the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Union in Senegal, 65 percent of small and medium-sized enterprises in Senegal disappear within the first year of creation<sup>16</sup>. In Cameroon, two-thirds of the 40,502 enterprises created in 2010 have disappeared by May 2016.<sup>17</sup>

These factors, amongst others, forward young people's interest in the political decision-making process. Therefore, the question how to promote the youth's involvement in major decision-taking, as well as by which means they can gain influence and leadership positions in effective governance, has to be raised.

### **Recommendations to Overcome Youth Underrepresentation in Political Decision-Making Processes in Africa**

A look at significant and fruitful changes or revolutions in history reveals that these were mostly precipitated by those, who were discontent with the previous system. The decolonization processes in Africa in the 1950-60s (Ghana in 1957, Algeria in 1962) or the accession to multiparty system (Senegal in 1974) are meaningful examples for the youth of today. It is up to the youth to address its underrepresentation in the political decision-making processes. However, how could such a breakthrough occur? If there are different manners to lead "the struggle", the strategy for promoting youth representation in politics must be carefully thought out in order not to reproduce a similar system of political exclusion.

There is an undefeatable force in the youth that every political formation has to take into account: it is the strength in numbers. As highlighted above, the vast majority of Africans is below 30 years of age. The typology of African political parties shows that, due to the electoral systems (proportional and/or majority), currently no elite political party – *parti de cadre* – exists and prevails. Most parties are based on mass participation, including a high number of young supporters. Thus, if youths are not well-integrated, they are, to a certain degree, accountable for their own non-integration in the political decision-making process. To overcome underrepresentation, two elements have to be taken into consideration: first, the youth itself and second, political authorities.

First, as today's world is determined by information and news, whoever disposes of information, detains the power over the other stakeholders. Thus, the first step for a better inclusion in the decision-making process is to improve information seeking, not only relative to the youth's immediate interests, but also with regard to information sensitive to the political arena. This comprises the understanding of how state institutions work, what legal dispositions regulate, what are the citizen's rights and duties and how can they defend their rights, how citizens access information concerning the economic situation of the country, the political measures (in discussion or already adopted), the political programs of different parties (their ideology and priorities) and how to link recent political, economic and social developments.

This is an attitude that has to be developed through debates, simulations or workshops. By these means, the youth will gain advanced awareness on specific issues and will be better prepared to defend a precise position on a relevant issue.

Access to information is crucial because it enables transparent policy-making with equal and balanced governing. Youths should operate in existing formal political and civilian entities or create new legal structures beyond which they act. These legal organisms (new or ancient) guarantee recognition of the youth by the political authorities. Mostly they draw the attention of states' institutions on the emergence of a non-neglectable movement in the political arena. With these tools above, two scenarios are possible:

Youths operating within an existing party: they gain respect and consideration thanks to their ability to objectively and clearly defend a certain position towards other members or by representing their own party. Furthermore, they constitute an asset that the concerned party does not want to lose. Subsequently, getting access to the decision-making process will be the rule and not the exception of the rule.

Youths opting for the creation of new structures: they will be coveted and concurred with by formal existing political parties at the same time. When taking this path, youths should remain vigilant towards those actors who support their actions and others who may approach them in order to strengthen their own electoral clientele. The legalization of independent candidatures (in presidential, parliamentary or local elections) without political affiliation across the African continent will benefit youth movements, mostly in local and parliamentary elections.

If the youth is the driving force behind its own political integration, authorities also have a real responsibility to meet. It is among their duties to promote legal frames to the benefit of the young generation. The political and social maturity of young people determines the nature of the future population of a country. If underrepresentation of the youth persists, the same system will shape states institutions in the coming 25 years, including the underrepresentation of the youth's complaints and priorities in the political programs. Politicians cannot neglect the underrepresentation of the young generation in the future.

The analysis of some legal dispositions relative to the voter turnout in African countries shows a disadvantage towards youth, as highlighted above. Age-related barriers should be lowered (equating active and passive suffrage) and capacity enhancement campaigns on election issues to raise awareness among young people should be launched, including the right of access to information that has not yet been settled in many African countries. However, this is still not enough because it does not guarantee an adequate representation of the youth in the elective positions. Legal dispositions should enact and protect a quota system that reserves a minimum number for youths in electoral lists of political parties and the total number of members of parliament. In Uganda, only five seats in the parliament are reserved for young people. In the Kenyan parliament, only twelve seats are dedicated to persons nominated by political parties who defend particular interests of the youth. In Morocco, candidates below forty years of age are granted thirty seats in Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, with the ongoing decentralization process in nearly all African countries, local authorities should incorporate in their development programs activities of political integration for youths of their constituency. These programs should encourage the youth's political interest adapted to the social, religious and ethnical configuration of the concerned locality.

In summary, the underrepresentation of young people in the political decision-making process is a counterproductive practice for all societies. It is the

convergence of several factors that requires a serious reflection on how to better listen to the youth's priorities and include them in the decision-making process. The negligence of the youth's demands and non-effective development programs have produced cyclical waves of social contestations and rendered the young generation vulnerable towards violent organizations such as Boko Haram in North Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad, pirate groups in the Gulf of Guinea and the Al Shabaab group in Somalia. Similarly, this fueled the violent conflicts that ravaged Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s.

Today, all claims hailed by the youth in Africa share the same transcendent bases, such as the creation of job opportunities, social justice, effective education systems and better living-conditions. It is not justifiable that none of the African countries has solved the youth's primary problems during the last half century. Due to high fertility rates (7.81 in Ivory Coast, 7.6 in Kenya, 7.63 in Niger<sup>19</sup>) the African youth will continue to grow in the upcoming years. Further, we have witnessed how social media influences sociopolitical developments, as the Arab uprising in 2011 has shown. Now is the time for government and non-government actors to think about its negligence of the youth in the political decision-making process and to determine whether its continuation is sensible, given the risk for large-scale uprisings.

Conversely, does the youth have to stay outside the political field and remain underrepresented to become the priority of political programs? Serious consequences of these latter options



have to be taken into consideration. By supporting the youth's integration in politics, African governments will gain more (democracy reinforcement, social cohesion and social justice, better understanding of youths' claims) than they would lose.

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