

Youth Political Participation in Nigeria: Legality, Trends, Dilemmas and Opportunities

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at examining the history, development, legality, and trend of participation of youths in Nigerian politics. Presently in Nigeria, only the youths can better appreciate and refocus their strength for the great re-direction and turn-around needed to achieve a stable polity, devoid of rancorous, turbulent, and uncertainties characterising the political landscape. It is intended to inspire the teeming Nigerian youths and shift their focus to the opportunities and the legal requirements for participating in politics and shun the get-rich-quick syndrome as well as the backstage position they hitherto occupy.

Keywords: Youth Political Participation, Opportunities, Legality, Trends and Dilemmas

Introduction

...The answer is to rely on youth- not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease....A young monk began the Protestant reformation; a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth; a young woman reclaimed the territory of France; and it was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and the 32 year-old Thomas Jefferson who [pro]claimed that "all men are equal." These men moved the world, and so can we all....¹

We are at a crossroad in Nigeria now, and only the youths can better appreciate and refocus our *strength*² for the great re-direction and turn-around needed to achieve a stable polity, devoid of rancorous, turbulent, and uncertainties presently characterising our political landscape.

Who is a 'Youth'?

Who is a youth? The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary³ defines youth as '*a young man*'. It is also define as the time of life when one is young, especially the time before a child becomes an adult. Definition of the specific age range which is generally acceptable, for the purpose of determining who is a youth varies. It is therefore difficult to arrive at a specific age range which is generally acceptable for the purpose of using age as parameter for determining whether an individual is a youth or not. Even where an age range is suggested, an individual's actual maturity may not correspond to their chorological age, as immature individuals can exist at all ages.

Youth Researchers have therefore come to define youth through personal experience especially in terms of an individual's level of dependency, which can be marked in various ways according to different cultural perspectives. Youth's level of dependency refers to the extent to which they still rely on their family emotionally and economically.⁴ According to Elaigwu⁵ youth connotes age, but age can be a biological terminology or a sociological category. A young man could through social mobilisation occupy the apex of the socio-political pyramid.⁶

For certain uses, such as employment statistics, 'youth' sometimes refer to individuals from the ages of 14 – 21years while the British Youth Council refers to youth as a person under the age of 31 years.⁷ In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics in its 2012 National Baseline Youth Survey put the youth population in Nigeria (from 15 to 35years) at 64 million. Scholars argued that age – based definitions have not been consistent across cultures or times, and that thus, it is more accurate to focus on social processes in the transition to adult independence for defining youth.⁸

Youth is therefore the stage of constructing the *self-concept*. The self-concept of youth is influenced by

¹ Robert F. Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation" (Being a speech delivered by him whilst a United State Senator, to the National Union of South African Students), University of Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966.

² The Holy Bible says the Glory of Youths is their Strength.

³ International Student's Edition, (Oxford University Press, New York) 2005 at P. 1713

⁴ Furlong Andy (2013), Youth Studies: An Introduction, USA; Routledge, pp. 2 – 3

⁵ Elaigwu J. Isawa (2005); *Building for Total Excellence: The Youth and Nation Building in Nigeria*, in 'Nigeria Yesterday and Today for Tommorrow, Essays in Governance and Society' AHA Publishing House Ltd. Pgs. 74-84.

⁶ Ibid at pg. 77.

⁷ Altshuler D.; Strangler G; Berkely K.; Burton L. (2009), supporting Youth in Transition to Adulthood: Lessons Learned from Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice". Centre for Juvenile Justice Reform.

⁸ Tyyska Vappu (2005) "Conceptualizing and Theorizing Youth Research: Local Expressions and Global Connections", London: Ashgate Books, p.3

several factors such as peers, lifestyle, gender, and culture.¹ It is the time of a person's life in which he makes crucial choices which will affect his future.² This is summarised in the words of Robert F. Kennedy cited in the abstract above.³ According to Chief (Dr) Paul Olatunde Alabi, former Deputy Governor of Ekiti State in the Forward to a book said;⁴

The word 'Youth' refers to the time when a person is young, or the state or quality of being young. A time that is full of vitality.

What matters therefore is not the age but the quality of a youth and meeting its attendant features in an individual. I therefore summarise the issue thus; the gun matters, but the man holding the gun matters more.

Dynamics of 'Politics'

Generally speaking, politics is concerned with the aggregation of the inter-relationship of man, his environment and the management of any conflict arising from such association.⁵ Specifically speaking however, there is variation in definitional perception of the word 'politics' which is determined by the area of the subject matter in which an individual is interested. This may be the area of *governmental activity* or *non-governmental activity*. It is however noticed that more often than not, people tend to ascribe politics to governmental actions or inactions, and any struggle towards attaining the control of governmental power at any level. Within the context of the topic before me, politics or political participation is a perception of politics within the governmental viewpoint. It is therefore pertinent to look at the definition of politics by Harold Lasswell who conceived politics as **"Who gets What, When, and How?"**⁶ By this definition, Lasswell conceives of politics from the perspective of incumbent power wielders within or outside of government and their means of power acquisition and within what time frame. The point here is therefore whether youths should be involved in determining who gets what when and how in Nigeria.

'Participation'

To participate according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary⁷ is 'to take part in' or become involved in an activity or event. There are however types and levels of political 'participation'. A person may *actively* participate in a politics, *passively* participate in politics thing or become totally *indifferent* to it. There could also be *direct* and *indirect* participation. Socially and politically speaking, participation refers to the platform and the mechanisms for the public to express opinions and ideally exert influence, regarding political, economic, management or other social decisions.⁸ Democracy has tremendously enhanced people's participation in Nigeria and all over the world. This is why democracy is seen as the best form of government, at least in the area of participation.⁹

For well-informed participation to take place, some version of transparency is necessary by the decision makers, while knowledge through information seeking is required on the part of the populace. Participation can build public support for governmental activities; it can also facilitate useful information exchange regarding local conditions. It further enables individuals and groups to influence governmental decisions in a representational manner.¹⁰ At the utmost, it may lead to an evolutionary change in government as witnessed in Nigeria at the last election or revolutionary change in government as witnessed in the Arab Spring.¹¹ In all of the occasions mentioned above, youths took the centre stage and brought about the changes.

Youth participation in politics can therefore be mobilized at the personal or group level, which is youth groups in Schools, Churches, Mosques, age grades, street youths, town youths, State, National, and International etc.¹² Presently in Nigeria and in most parts of the world, social media also play a very great and significant role

¹ Thomas A, (2013) "Psychology of Adolescent", Self-Concept, Weight Issues and Body Image in Children and Adolescents. p.88

² Wing John Jr. (2012), 'Youth', Windson Review: a journal of the Arts.

³ See footnote 1

⁴ Ilesanmi, O.T. (2003); The Roles of Youths in National Development, Favourland Publications, Ado-Ekiti, pg. 3.

⁵ Kolawole Dipo, (2005) 'Concept of Politics' in Readings in Political Science (ed), Dakaal Publishers, Ibadan at p. 1

⁶ Ibid at P.2

⁷ Ibid at 1062

⁸ Wikipedia Online, 'Participation (decision making)'

⁹ This is not to say that democracy guarantees performance or good governance, these depend on the desire and political will of leaders to make a difference. See Afolayan, M.S., (2015); *Legal Regime of Good Governance for Sustainable Development in Nigeria*, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti Law Journal, Vol.6, pp 152-169.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Arab Spring was triggered in Tunisia by the self-immolation of a youth named Mohamed Bouazizi. Unable to find work and selling fruit at a roadside stand, on 17th December, 2010, a Municipal Inspector confiscated his wares. An hour later, he doused himself with gasoline and set himself ablaze. His death on 4th January, 2011 brought together various groups dissatisfied with the existing system, including many unemployed, political and human right activists, labour, trade unionists, students, professors, lawyers, and others to begin the Tunisian revolution. Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Kuwait, Morocco, Mauritania, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Palestine all caught the wave of the revolution which caused a lot of positive change in their polity.

¹² This is derived from the constitutional freedom to speak out, assemble and associate, the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs, register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government.

in youth orientation and mobilisation.

The Nation or Country called ‘Nigeria’.

Nigeria is a country officially known and referred to as the Federal Republic of Nigeria,¹ comprising 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Nigeria is often referred to as ‘Giant of Africa’ due to its large population put approximately at 174 million inhabitants. Nigeria is the most populous Country in Africa and the 7th most populous Country in the World.² The Country is inhabited by over 500 ethnic groups, of which the largest are the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

The National Bureau of Statistics in the 2012 National Baseline Youth Survey disclosed that the population of youths (15 – 35 years) in Nigeria is estimated to be 64 Million.³ Using the baseline of the total population of Nigerian at the National Population Census 2006, youth population in Nigeria is put at 60 per cent. This is because the National Youth Policy defines ‘youth’ as a Nigerian Citizen below the age of 35 years. About 32.4 per cent of the total population is below the age of 18 years. In absolute terms, there are more young people in Nigeria today than any other segment of the population and this comes with its peculiar social, political and economic implications.⁴

‘Trends’, ‘Dilemmas’ and ‘Opportunities’.

While by ‘trends’ here we mean a general direction in which a situation is changing or developing, by ‘dilemma’ we refer to a situation which makes problems, often one in which you have to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance, ‘opportunity’ refer to a period of time when a particular situation or circumstances makes it possible or right to do or achieve something. It also refers to benefits.

The question we are therefore faced with here is what has been the level of participation of Nigerian youths (if any) in the Nigerian politics and what is the general direction, the difficult choices youths have to make and what are the benefits for a youth who has decided to actively participate in the Nigeria Politics.

Brief Historical Background to Youth Participation in Nigeria Politics.

Time will not permit me to go into a long historical background here. However, Nigeria’s political history would be incomplete without the indelible records of youth’s participation and involvements. The Pre – Independence efforts of Nigerian youths contributed much to the achievement of independence in Nigeria as a Nation. Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Anthony Enahoro and others who championed the cause of Nigerian Independence were young students. They started their agitation for independence as Student Union Activists, and carried on formidable groups that challenged colonial rule. Anthony Enahoro was about twenty-one years old when he moved the motion for the Independence of Nigeria; Yakubu Gowon was only twenty-nine years old when he became the Head of State in Nigeria. Late Isaac Adaka Boro, fresh from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was in his thirties when he formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Force and later fought for the emancipation of his people. A look at the life history of these people reveals that as young men, they had their challenges, bleak moments, and seemingly intractable future, yet they took up the gauntlet and made a difference. From the 60 per cent of the youth population in Nigeria today (covering about 80 million people) more than 70 per cent are said to be unemployed even after obtaining relevant work experiences and acquiring other qualifications for the job. The danger and implication of unemployment and idleness of youths is better imagined. The imagined picture forms the trends of youth participation in Nigeria Politics today. We are still at the base of Abraham Maslow’s theory of needs. Food, shelter and clothing remain the paramount need of Nigerian youths, therefore the future remains bleak.

Legal Qualification for Youths Political Participation in Nigeria.

- (1) **Age:** In Nigeria, a person is of full age, capable of exercising the electoral rights of an adult when he attains the age of 18 years. This is as contained in Section 24(4) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended). The implication of this politically is that an 18-year old Nigerian is eligible to vote at any election by the virtue of universal adult suffrage being practiced in Nigeria. However, in order to contest elections or present himself for election in Nigeria, he must have attained the requisite age required for the office into which he or she seeks election as provided in the Constitution and other relevant laws, some of which are;
 - i. If he or she seeks to be the President of the Federation, he must have attained the age of 40 years old as stipulated in Section 131 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended).

¹ See Section 2(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended).

² Wikipedia; ‘Nigeria’.

³ Nigeria estimated population for 2012 was put at 168.8 million. Sources: World Bank, United States Census Bureau

⁴ 2012 National Baseline Survey ‘Youth’, National Bureau of Statistics, Final Report (Revised)

- ii. To be a Governor or a Senator he must have attained the age of 35 years old. See Sections 171 and 65 of the Constitution respectively.
- iii. To be a member of the House of Representatives, House of Assembly of a State, a Minister in the Federal Cabinet or a Commissioner in the State Cabinet, he must have attained the age of 30 years old. See Section 65, Section 106(b), Section 147(5) and Section 192(4) of the Nigerian Constitution.
- iv. To be qualified for election into any of the 774 Local Government Area Council in Nigeria as Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Ward Councillor, he or she must be a citizen of Nigeria, must be a register voter, must have attained the age of 25 years for Councillor and 30 years for Chairman and Vice-Chairman, must be educated up to at least the School Certificate level or its equivalent and must be a member of a political party and is sponsored by that party.

(2) Education

Nearly all the elective posts mentioned above requires a contestant to be at the minimum, educated to Senior School Certificate level, that is, he must have completed his/her studies in the Secondary School level or its equivalents. This minimum education requirement does not however mean that a school certificate is sufficient to navigate the word of politics and leadership at this computer age. I will suggest here that some amount of tertiary education, which allows for the development of an independent mind, understanding of the world around us, and responsibility for decision-making are required here.

(3) Citizenship of Nigeria

Whereas it is not required to be a Nigerian Citizen for one to vote at an election in Nigeria, to be voted for in an election in Nigeria is a different ball game. There are three types of citizenship recognized by the Constitution, namely;

- i. Citizenship by birth;
- ii. Citizenship by registration; and
- iii. Citizenship by naturalization.¹

Unlike in the cases of candidates for the offices of the President, the Vice-President, the Governors and the Deputy Governors, a candidate for a National Assembly and House of Assembly seat does not constitutionally have to be a Nigerian citizen by birth. Any of the three categories of citizenship would qualify such a person. It must be noted that a person who loses his/her citizenship due to acquisition of dual citizenship, renunciation or deprivation of citizenship by the President is not qualified to contest for a seat in the National Assembly. It must also be noted that indigeneship and other political considerations or calculations can seriously affect or jeopardise a candidate's interest even where he has met up with the requirements. This is evidently present in the political calculus in Nigeria.

(4) Membership of a Political Party

Until the very recent debate and consideration of the National Conference Reports by the National Assembly which has shown the favourable disposition of the National Assembly to the concept of independent candidacy of a person in an election, a candidate for any election in Nigeria must not only belong to a political party but must be sponsored by the party.

The Constitution as it is presently does not permit independent candidates as in other countries. It is however sufficient that a candidate is nominated by the party and not necessarily that he or she is financially supported for the election. The trends in the Nigeria politics is however such that political parties and godfathers wield a lot of influence on a successful candidate and this is bringing about clog in the wheels of progress and dangerous political atmosphere which may sometimes lead to threat of impeachment, breakdown of law and order or assassination of a political office holder for being at loggerheads with his political party or the bigwigs in the party. The abduction of Chris Ngige whilst being the Governor of Anambra State and the substitution of Rotimi Amaechi's name at the last minute as the Governorship Nominee of Rivers State provides a good example on point here.

(5) Sex/Gender

While sex refers to the biological traits of being a male or female, gender refers to the image and role created by any given society with its attendant social, religious, superstitious, customary and psychological connotation. I must put it straightforward here that the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended) frowns at, and prohibits any form of discrimination on ground of sex or gender. It provides:

"42(1) A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person –
(a) be subjected either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any Law in Force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action of the government, to disabilities or

¹ See Sections 25, 26 and 27 respectively of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (As Amended).

restrictions to which Citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups places or origin, sex, religion or political opinions are not made subject.”

By the foregoing provision therefore, being a male or a female is not a limitation or restriction to contest for any office in Nigeria. In fact it amounts to violation of the inalienable fundamental rights of an individual to restrain him or her from contesting for a particular elective position only because he or she is of a particular gender.¹

In practice however, the trend has always being that the cultural and customary perspective of Nigerians have put a bar on the election of the female gender into some elective posts like the President, Vice – President and Governors. We have recently broken the jinx on the Deputy Governorship post. Dame Virginia Etiaba, Mrs Olaoye Tomori, Late Mrs Funmilayo Abeni Olayinka, Kofoworola Akerele Bucknor, Mrs Modupe Adelabu are few of the female folks who have broken that barrier. Dame Virginia Ngozi Etiaba occupied the office of Governor of Anambra State from 2nd November 2006 to 9th February 2007. She is the first female Governor in Nigeria’s history. Her promotion came as the previous governor, Peter Obi, was impeached by the State legislature for alleged gross misconduct. She transferred the power back to Obi three months later when an Appeal Court nullified the impeachment process.² I must state here that she was a loyal Deputy Governor to Mr Peter Obi and she refused all entreaties and subliminal prodding to backstab her boss when the latter was illegally thrown out of office.

In Nigeria, we look forward to a time when the number one to three will be of the female gender as attempts are being made by courageous women to take a shot at the presidency. Mrs Sarah Jibril has made a laudable attempt at the Presidency. Mrs Olubunmi Patricia Etteh was once the Speaker of the House of Representatives, while the Chief Justice of Nigeria though not an elective post was once occupied by a woman, Justice Mariam Aloma Mukhtar. The youth has the duty to sustain this trend, being the leaders of tomorrow.

(6) Other Disqualifying Elements

- i. A youth who is targeting participation in politics especially elective office must have soundness of mind. A lunatic cannot be elected. Drug abuse, excessive alcohol and strange addictions may lead to lunacy; youths must therefore shun drug abuse and excessive alcohols.
- ii. He/She must also not be a convict either for the death sentence or for a term of imprisonment for an offence involving fraud or dishonesty.
- iii. A bankrupt person, that is, an un-discharged bankrupt cannot participate in an election into the National Assembly. The procedure for declaring a person bankrupt is contained in the Bankruptcy Act.
- iv. A serving public servant of the State or Federation must have left his or her employment at least 30 days before the date of the election. Employees in the public service are those listed in Section 318 of the Constitution.
- v. A youth who is a member of Secret Society is not qualify for election into the National Assembly.
- vi. Indictment for embezzlement and forgery are also disqualifying elements, though such must be proved beyond reasonable doubt.

Trends and Dilemma of Youths Participation in Politics

Worldwide and in the area of political participation, in a third of countries, eligibility for national parliament starts at 25 years old or older. 1.65% of Parliamentarians around the world are in their 20s and 11.87% are in their 30s. The average age of parliamentarians globally is 53 (50 years old for women parliamentarians).³ This is still so, despite the fact that young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world’s population. Youths can be a creative force, a dynamic source of innovations, and they have undoubtedly, throughout history, participated, contributed and even catalysed important changes in political systems, power-sharing dynamics and economic opportunities. A vivid example of this is found in the triggering of the Arab Spring in Tunisia by the self-immolation of a youth named Mohamed Bouazizi. Unable to find work and selling fruit at a roadside stand, on 17th December, 2010, a Municipal Inspector confiscated his wares. An hour later, he doused himself with gasoline and set himself ablaze. His death on 4th January, 2011 brought together various groups dissatisfied with the existing system, including many unemployed, political and human right activists, labour, trade unionists, students, professors, lawyers, and others to begin the Tunisian revolution. Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Kuwait, Morocco, Mauritania, Lebanon,

¹ AFOLAYAN, M.S. (2008). *The Right to Freedom from Discrimination Under the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria: An Appraisal*, Unpublished LL.B. Thesis - University of Ado-Ekiti.

² In *PETER OBI v INEC* (2007) 7 S.C. 268;

³ UNDP and IPU (2012) Global Parliamentary Report.

Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Palestine all caught the wave of the revolution which caused a lot of positive change in their polity.

However, in Nigeria, youths face poverty, displacement, and barriers to education, multiple forms of discrimination and limited employment prospects and opportunities. These have constituted clog in wheels of growth and development of both the body and minds of the majority of Nigerian youths, thereby reducing them to a mere political tool in the hands of the ruling class in Nigeria. Niger Delta Militants, Boko Haram etc., are example of youth groups whose power have been negatively channel to the destruction of the nation instead of building it.

Youths have generally been negatively mobilized by political class because they tend to thrive in thuggery, violence and the like, apparently because of poverty, unemployment and the selfish motive of people who exploit them. A situation where politicians, chiefs and businessmen recruit youths as thugs, arm them with dangerous weapons, and reward them for terrorizing people is greatly counter-productive. Nigerian youths must be encouraged to participate positively and actively in political processes. Such encouragement could mean building necessary social structures and providing the enabling atmosphere for the realization of individual talents, personality development and group survival.

Factors affecting Youth Mobilization and Participation

- i. The pattern of political socialization and culture.
- ii. The incursion of military into politics which has destroyed democratic cultures and institutions. This has robbed the youths of having knowledge of what the ideal, proper and civil political processes should be.
- iii. Commercialization of politics which has turned it to investment, money spinning venture and the one sure way to quick wealth and riches. It is no longer seen as gateway to leadership.
- iv. Greed, Bribery, Corruption, and Negative influence of role models.¹
- v. Wrong political leadership structure.

The above mentioned factors could however be remedied and turn around by strategic groupings, political education, empowerment and enlightenment programmes.

Opportunities for Youth in Politics

In Nigeria, opportunities abound for youths in politics. They are uncountable and limitless. Some of these opportunities are;

- i. Leveraging and building an uncommon transformation and legacy for the future based on the knowledge of our past which has led us to the present. This can be made possible by harnessing the population strength of youths in Nigeria.
- ii. Youths can serve as catalyst for an evolution of a new Nigeria in ensuring the security of lives and property of the people at all times, while adhering to the principle of the rule of law, ensuring equity, justice and fairplay.
- iii. Harnessing the resources of vigour and strength to bring about rural development and integration, benefits and dividends of democratic governance to every nook and cranny in Nigeria and provision of basic amenities of life to all.
- iv. Development of new values, ideal orientation, and proper thinking for the coming generations.
- v. Becoming a National and International Leader, thereby by stamping their feet on the sand of time.

5. Conclusion

This paper has revealed that opportunities for Nigerian Youths in politics abound and that Youths can be a beacon of new hope for political direction in Nigeria. I therefore call on all youths in body and minds to take this as a challenge to make Nigeria a better place now and in the future.

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¹ Afolayan, M.S., (2014); Corruption, A Cankerworm in Nigeria: The Dilemma of the Criminal Code and the ICPC, *Umaru Musa Yar'Adua University Law Journal*, Vol.1 No.1, Arise Corporate Ltd., pp 58-73.

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