

"There is plenty of room at the top because very few people care to travel beyond the average route. And so most of us seem satisfied to remain within the confines of mediocrity"¹

THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The government is not working, our politicians are ineffective; this is a common statement that proceeds from the lips of our youths in this era.

A Peep into History

When did we get to this point? Let us briefly look into history. In 1933, a group of young intellectuals founded the Lagos Youth Movement; they exerted genuine influence on the country's political life. This political party succeeded in uniting the different peoples and tribes (Ibo, Yoruba, Ijaw and others) of the country for a period. Amongst other things, they protested against the exclusion of Nigerians from the civil service and severely denounced discrimination against Nigerian in other spheres of life. In 1936, the Lagos Youth Movement was renamed the Nigerian Youth Movement, the first genuine nationalist organization in Nigeria.

Prominent amongst its founders were Kofo Abayomi, Samuel Akisanya, Ernest Ikoli and H. O. Davies who were 37, 35, 40 and 28

¹ Nnamdi Azikwe, *My Odyssey, An Autobiography*, Spectrum Books 1971

years old respectively.² Their activities promoted the national consciousness of the Nigerians and prepared the ground for the subsequent formation of mass political parties. In 1938 the Movement published 'The Nigerian Youth Charter'³ and their programme ensured its victory at the elections to the Legislative Council with its candidates winning all the three Lagos constituencies.⁴ Its active members included many people who subsequently became prominent statesmen and political leaders.⁵

Definition of Youth

In Nigeria, the word 'youth' has been defined to mean all young persons between the ages of 18 and 35 years who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria⁶. From available statistics, Nigeria has

² Note that Murtala Mohammed was just 37 when he became head of state, Ken-Saro Wiwa was appointed civilian administrator of Bonny before he was 30 years old. However, these men must have been politically inclined before this age.

³ A combination of three separate charters containing its official objectives: the Political Charter, which advocated the takeover of the government by the indigenous people; the Economic Charter, which demanded equal economic opportunities for foreigners and Nigerians; and the Cultural and Social Charter, which stated that mass education should be the true pivot of educational policy.

⁴ In 1938, new local organisations of the Nigerian Youth Movement sprang up in Ibadan, Benin, Aba, Enugu, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Jos, Kaduna, Zaria, Kano and other towns. At the end of 1938, the Nigerian Youth Movement, according to data of its leaders, had up to 10,000 members in 20 provincial branches.

⁵ Nnamdi Azikwe, Kofo Abayomi, Ernest Ikoli.

⁶ National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action, 2001.

an estimated population of over 164.4 million⁷ of which the youth constitute at least 60 percent of her population. Unfortunately, of this youthful population, over 54 percent⁸ are said to be unemployed despite obtaining relevant work experiences and acquiring various qualifications.

He who wears the shoes knows where it pinches. The youths increasingly say they have little or no opportunity to participate in government. I say, where are the youths? Are they registered with any political party? Are they active participants in their wards? Do they even know their wards? Do they know their Local Government Chairmen? What criteria do they use in electing their representatives? We keep saying the youths are not given a chance in the appropriate seat in the government. If you don't get a chance, you create one.

The youths are the dynamic and vibrant part of the country; they are the country's future. In a case where youth are in the government, they are sure to propose sustainable solutions to the critical issues facing the country. They are blessed with the ability of cognitive reasoning, they have the strength and zeal to do exploits and they have the added advantage of having elders from whom they can receive counsel.

Youths, What Are You Doing?

7 Okechukwu Nnodim, "Nigeria's unemployment rates raises 23.9 %-NPC" Punch Newspaper (Abuja 11 October 2013) Accessed 8 May 2014.

8 2012 National Baseline Youth Survey, National Bureau Of Statistics In Collaboration With Federal Ministry Of Youth Development.

Time has come for the youth in Nigeria to arise, partake in politics and fight for their right by influencing the Nigerian policy making process. From the above, this is not a new thing. In fact, it is the ideal situation as there is an urgent need for the infusion of new ideas with the old points of view. How long shall the youth be separated from the process of national development when such things actively affect them? The future of the nation lies in the hands of the youths.

For example, the NYM brought under one umbrella, the politically conscious, the anti-colonialists and the articulate elements of the Nigerian population. Their policies created the nationalist spirit in the minds of their members, many of whom went on to fight for the independence of Nigeria.

It is imperative that youths think hard and deep on what their ideals are, what they stand for, their values and their principles. We have youths on the various social networks posting their views and opinion on politics, the government and the nation as a whole. That is a start but it doesn't end there. There is a need to identify a party that shares similar political inclination with you, register, participate actively, introduce new values, influence their policies if there be a need for change, or better yet, create new political parties.

The youths have great clout and should they decide to use that power or should they endeavor to register and vote, the change we want so desperately would start from now. It is necessary that research (due diligence) be done to discover if the candidate has a concrete plan and systematic ways of achieving it.

Nigeria is a country filled with milk, honey and our youths, the Nigerian youths, represent over 50 percent of the country, their votes don't only count, they decide. That is as regards the power of the youth. But how have our youths fared in respect of their responsibility?

The situation in the country today calls for emergency. The evils of the past have caught up with us and our youths do not seem to imbibe the core values that shaped our society in the days of Awolowo and others. I have observed elsewhere that it is clear that the problems of today are steeped in the past. Both seniors and, more importantly, the younger generations, whose future is tied to the present, are now on trial. While the senior citizens enjoyed better economic situation in their own days and they actually made efforts to put in place the most disciplined and well-organised civil service in those days, all these have been wiped away by the gnomes of corruption and pterodactyls of impunity. We are now victims of the Ghandian Seven Deadly Sins, namely

- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Business without ethics
- Science without humanity
- Religion without sacrifice, and last but not the least,
- Politics without principle.⁹

We have reduced ourselves to savages who play politics without principle and this has really affected the participation level of the

⁹ Stephen R. Covey, Principle-Centered Leadership, Free Press, 87 - 93.

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youths in modern politics. We recorded the worst electoral evils in 2007 and 2011 when elections were brazenly rigged. Who were the persons used to rig? Who were the persons armed to cause violence and pervert the course of democracy? It was the youth! The innocent but corrupted youth!

We impose on ourselves candidates rejected by the people based on sycophancy and servile considerations. We operate in total disregard of rules when they do not suit us and apply the rules only to our personal advantage. As followers, we elect only leaders who can buy our freedom and at the same time we lament our bondage. Majority of the voters, principally youths, out of excruciating poverty and a mortgaged electoral conscience, sell their voters' cards for paltry sums and assist politicians to illegally occupy offices.

We are, therefore, the architects of our own misfortunes from the beginning till our resurrection and yet we clamour for saviours who do not exist elsewhere but in ourselves. In your state of unemployment and damning poverty, you scramble for works that the political class has failed to create and subject yourselves to victims of job scams. What happened in this country during the immigration fake recruitment would have triggered off a revolution in a country populated by conscious youths and politically agile populace. The Minister of Interior and his company are smiling to the banks at the expense of the unemployed but defrauded youths yet we are here talking of the role of the youths in political process.

In my few years on earth and in politics, I have seen elders who are supposed to be the guiding lights to the youths demanding money

before they would vote for a candidate. I have made efforts to counsel parents who tutored their children on the day of election to leave the party of 'the miserable' and better opt for the party of 'the affluent' who can afford to distribute ₦2,000 to purchase their votes. I have read the self-confession of how governors rigged elections¹⁰ and the self-damnation, but without any consequence, of how Akpabio, the governor of Akwa Ibom State, boasted of his unilateral replacement of a winner of an election by his favoured candidate who unfortunately lost the election.¹¹

But unfortunately, our youths no longer raise questions. Our youths no longer hold their leaders accountable unlike what used to be in the past. The democratically revolutionary spirit of the past has given way to a docile but mischievous trend in which every youth wants to ride big cars at the expense of the gullible but affluent in the scam business infamously called 'yahoo-yahoo'. A governor recently observed that the ruling class is corrupt because nobody stones its members when they appear in public flaunting their ill-gotten wealth.

It is your duty to rise up to the challenges of today. It is part of the lessons of reality that it is our duty to hold our leaders accountable to the rule of law. A god did not appoint and elevate itself until people started worshiping it. The culture of impunity by which we

¹⁰ Donald Duke in a speech delivered at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel on how elections are rigged. The speech, posted on Sahara Reporters website on 19 July, 2010 and was still available on 4 November, 2013 at <http://saharareporters.com/report/must-read-how-governors-rig-elections-donald-duke-guardian?page=4>.

¹¹ See The Punch of March 25, 2013 news headline "Akpabio Admits Rigging Primary Election".

have rejected all dictates of universal adult suffrage at both primary and inter-party elections must be rejected and it is the duty of the youth to call society to order. When you join political parties do not merely joust for offices but call to question the process of nomination and election of leaders of the parties and the process of nomination of candidates. We must insist on internal democracy within your parties. You must look in the directions of the elders, identify areas where they stumbled, make efforts to avoid such stumbling blocks and decide to progress rather than retrogress.

You must be ready to let every vote count. You must eschew the politics of brigandage that took away the legacies bequeathed by the seniors who worked with people like Obafemi Awolowo, the Jakandes and the Bola Iges of this world. You must realize that no person is in bondage except those who submit themselves into bondage. Self-emancipation is a personal battle that you alone can win if you struggle to win.

In summary, the role of the youths can be detailed as follows:

1. let every youth register as party members in a party of his choice and participate in the affairs of the party in order to enthrone internal party democracy;
2. mobilise your colleagues to vote and take leadership challenges by contesting elections and ensure you monitor electoral processes in order to avoid rigging;
3. ensure that your mates who are youth corpers and are being deployed as presiding officers during elections do not compromise your collective future by ensuring that they do

- not lend themselves to fraudulent suggestions by corrupt politicians;
4. conscientise other youths on what qualitative leadership amounts to and the requirements of qualitative leadership;
 5. hold leaders to financial accountability via Freedom of Information Act and raise questions on the budget and other financial projections by the government;
 6. put government on its toes as regards its electoral promises and organise programmes by which leaders can be subjected to popular scrutiny;
 7. agitate for impeachment of executive officials that are found wanting in their responsibilities and embark on recall process against legislators that have failed in their mandates;
 8. mobilise your parents for effective participation in voting process and where your parents are security officials, let them realize the need to avoid mortgaging your future through manipulation of electoral process in favour roguish politicians;
 9. as elections approach, start campaigns to encourage one man, one vote in line with the hallowed principles of universal adult suffrage.
 10. Most importantly, registration as a voter is the foundation of your exercise of your franchise and must not be ignored at any point in time.

Be ready to liberate yourselves as no one can do it for you.

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