

## **The Role of Youths in Electoral Processes: An Appraisal of the Nigerian 2015 General Elections And Beyond**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Youths represent a significant proportion of the Nigerian Population, but in spite of this, their level of political participation and representation in the electoral process in the past has been very poor and often times undermined; being largely noticed at the level of electoral malpractices, voting irregularities and covert or overt thuggery in support of political office seekers who paradoxically have dominated the political arena to the point of total exclusion of the youths, yet all groups (youths inclusive) seek to influence dispensation of power. The research therefore sets out to analytically x-ray the issues and challenges that confronted youths in previous general elections viz a viz the tremendous effort made by youths in making the 2015 general elections a success, by particularly the use of social media as a propaganda machine and the dogged attitude displayed in the course of retrieving permanent voters card which is unparalleled and unprecedented. The research explores the use of vivid descriptive scenarios to make sound and logical arguments on the plight and strive of youth in forestalling equity and fair play in our electoral process and also on the strides recorded thereof. Using variables such as lack of proper electoral education and sensitization in the past, religious, regional and sectional divide, poverty, deprivation, thuggery, social media, permanent voters card and so forth, the researchers conclude that youths have in the past been largely responsible for scuttling elections but were however instrumental to the success of the 2015 general elections. It therefore recommends amongst other things that, it is imperative to develop and enhance the capability of youths in the electoral process by creating a robust orientation programme and also engaging them to become financially and morally equip, so as to drastically reduce if not totally eradicate arm-twisting or manipulation of youths in the society.*

**Keywords:** *Role, Youths, Electoral Processes, Appraisal, General, Beyond.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Nigeria's democratic journey in contemporary times began with the tacit acceptance by the military hierarchy of the need to demilitarize the nation's political space. This gained actual fruition on May 29, 1999 when the then General Abdulsalami Abubakar as Head of State handed over political power to an elected President in the person of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. For years of democratic experimentation, - although with military altercations in the past leading to the fourth republic in 1999 - the nation has conducted and witnessed eight general elections which took place in 1960, 1964, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and the most recent 2015 elections respectively. Throughout this strenuous journey, youths have played an indispensable role through their vibrancy and outspokenness. Yet, youths remain the most vulnerable - especially in times of election - and less of beneficiaries from the fruit of leadership and governance. It is not gainsaying that a genuinely inclusive society needs to ensure that its youth participate in all its affairs; that young people's views are included in development policies and that young people develop leadership skills. In many African countries, youth have either remained marginalized or not played a role in the political process. This is largely due to institutional and policy constraints of the state and society.

Therefore, the theme "Youth Participation in Electoral processes" could not have been coined at a better time. It is the most appropriate wakeup call to a continent and more especially a country - Nigeria, where youths are seen as expendable (that is, means to an end) section of the population. In the process of elective politics and governance, youths are either side-lined or excluded or when they are involved at all, they are mainly misused and abused to achieve the inordinate and perverse political ambition of the norm less, lawless and selfish section of the Nigerian political class. It is a general acceptable fact that youths are the indispensable and dynamic portion of the population of any nation as stated earlier. They are the incubators and the driving force for innovation, change and progress in all human collectivities; and no society can experience positive change and advancement if its youths are not strategically and constructively invested upon, empowered and engaged. Their immense energy and drive must be tactfully packaged and directed towards playing a constructive role in the process of governance and development of the society. As a link between the present and future, how a society's adult, especially the governing elites behave as well as the roles they assign to this important segment of the population, will determine to a large extent whether that society is advancing or heading towards disaster. It is in

light of the above that the paper decided to empirically investigate youth's involvement in the ugly phenomenon of electoral violence or otherwise and what implication its consequences will have on Nigeria. Nigerians have acquired a culture of electoral violence. Violence has become part of the political culture in Nigeria such that all elections since independence (Nigeria has conducted eight general elections since independence in 1960, the elections were held in 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003 and 2007, 2011, 2015) are virtually violence ridden – with exception of the just concluded 2015 general election, which proved that Nigeria could actually break the jinx. All of these (previous) elections were substantially marred by various types of violence associated with party politics and conduct of elections. The most troubling aspect of this issue is that youths (the future leaders of the nations) are the main perpetrators and at the same time the victims of electoral violence. Thus, the crux of the matter in this study is to underscore the role of youth's in general electoral processes by appraising Nigeria's 2015 general elections and beyond.

### **Youths and Violence**

The concept of youth has been subjected to diverse interpretations and flexible usage. At one level the youth are conceptualized in terms of their futuristic role as leaders of society. However, in his interrogation of the youth as a category Obi (2006: 5), aptly notes that: The categorization of the youth as future leaders assumes the non-interrogation of the existing power relations in society and is a recipe for preparing the youths to perpetuate a particular mode of power relations that suggest a permanence of structures of dominance and interests, but with the entry and exit of occupants' overtime Obi continues: This conceptualization also suggests the sub-ordination of youths to the power structure controlled by elders in order to facilitate system stability, cohesion and continuity. Political time then becomes a conveyor belt that takes the loyal and disciplined youth into future power, when the elders pass into myth and history (Obi; 2006: 6) It is also important to understand that for some youths particularly in the poverty stricken economies of the developing world, Nigeria inclusive, what is paramount is survival. They must first of all survive before they can begin to think of fighting for a future. Indeed, as Obi (2006: 9) notes: Where the very fact of survival is embedded in conflict, then the struggle for survival for the future is ambushed by more violence that sucks in young people into the vortex of class, ethnic, generational, communal and political agendas.

The bulging youth population, according to the NIC report, is a demographic feature that is linked with the "emergence of political violence and civil conflicts." In Nigeria, the federal government in 2008 acknowledged that about 80% of Nigeria's youth are unemployed and 10% underemployed (Daily Trust, 2008). In 2011, the Minister of Youth Development, Bolaji Abdullahi reported that 42.2 per cent of Nigeria's youth population is out of job. Depo Oyedokun, the Chairman of the House Committee on Youth and Social Development revealed that of the over 40 million unemployed youths in the country, 23 million are unemployable and therefore susceptible to crime, hence the need to articulate what could be done to salvage the situation. The pace is increasing because most graduates lack relevant marketable skills. These statistics are grim for a nation whose children and youths of age 0 - 35 constitute about 77 per cent or 105 million of its over 140 million population. This shows how the government over the years has showed very little interest in both children and youths in the country. University education development worldwide shows a direct relationship between the number of university graduates produced by a country and its economic and technological advancement. For example, United States with population twice that of Nigeria, has over 2,000 degree awarding institutions. Japan, having almost the same population as Nigeria, has over 600 universities. United Kingdom, having half our population, has 100 Universities. (Mustafa 2013) In the process of elective politics and governance, youths are either side-lined or excluded or when they are involved at all, they are mainly misused and abused to achieve the inordinate and perverse political ambition of the norm less, lawless and selfish section of the Nigerian political class. (Preyekuro, 2011) Youth all over the World are fondly called leaders of tomorrow. This is not farfetched from the fact that they are characterized with energy and mental alertness (Nnamani, 2003). This energy is either used positively or negatively depending on the individual or in some cases the society. According to Ekwuruke (2007) this is the period of vigor, curiosity, spiritedness action and inexperience. Most of these youths who in most cases are colleges and universities drop-outs often end up in urban centers in search of menial jobs, some others end-up on the streets, high way junctions, and in traffic hawking different items as "mobile super markets (Ekwuruke, 2007). All these societal problems further contribute to the continuous problem of youth violence and electoral process which most of the Nigerian youths are constantly involved in today. Assertively, the advent of civil rule and the rise of electoral violence, and youth restiveness in general, a lot is yet to be done in understanding the nexus between the youth's violence and electoral process in the Nigerian "democratic context" (Moveh, 2009).

### **The Role of Youths in Previous Elections: In Perspective**

Various studies in the past have often revealed that youths form bulk of the perpetrators of election related violence in Nigeria and around the world. This is in congruence with the view point of Akinboye (1987), McAllister (2004), Nweke (2005), Bazza (2008), that youths have been repeatedly used as instruments of violence: they have participated actively in destructive anti-social behaviours such as violent demonstrations, intra and inter political party fighting and other politically motivated violence, ritual killings, kidnapping and hostage taking, arson and cult related violence. Answers to the reason why youths are ever available and vulnerable instruments in the hands of unscrupulous politicians to perpetrate electoral violence have also been advanced thus; A closer look at the Nigerian political circle, reveals to the observer that bulk of the youths who are perpetrators of election related violence are unskilled, uneducated or ill-educated, unemployed and children of parents of poor socio-economic status. This view point is in line with Nweke's (2005) postulations. He posited that factors that are responsible for youth-led electoral violence include the following: a good number of youths who participate in acts of electoral violence come from embattled and economically poor homesteads; they are either uneducated or school drop-outs. High rate of unemployment and underemployment especially among graduates of tertiary institutions is yet another factor that accounts for the high incidence of youths participation in electoral violence; moral decadence in youths and as well as the political manipulation of the psycho-cultural dispositions of youths towards elections by political elites has equally generated violent competition at elections. The political elites have always convinced the youths that violent struggle at elections to ensure the victory of their ethnic-nationality or religions man or party member is a struggle in their favour and against marginalization or other forms of socio-economic discrimination. This position is confirmed by Akinboye (1987) who observed that most youths especially those who are desperately needy have problems in making and taking decisions. This largely explains why some politicians could capitalize on the weakness of youths about decision-making and taking and involving them in destructive anti-social behaviours the youths could not have loved to engage themselves in. It is also no gainsaying that; government intervention policies and structures towards tackling the problems of unemployment and poverty among youths are ill-motivated, poorly-packaged and are more of palliatives. And even were such government's interventionist instrument of confronting the problems of youth joblessness and restiveness exists – like that which was being implemented by the Ministry of Youths, Conflict Resolution and Employment Generations – it is not effective enough. Moreover, governments' poverty eradication programmes are too elitist and too far away from the needy youths. For instance, the SURE-P empowerment scheme meant for youths eventually ended up in the garages of the ruling party stalwarts and other senior government officials. In line with the above outcomes, this aligns with the positions' of Baba and Ogundiya (2005), Nweke (2005) and Ajayi (2007) who have asserted that; youth restiveness is the bane of electoral violence in any society. It was also observed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA 2001) that the lack of a clear adherence and respect for the rules guiding the electoral process is another obstacle thwarting the positive role expected of youths in elections. The IDEA further posited that the ease by which politicians are able to manipulate, influence, mobilize and arm disgruntled, jobless and needy youths to commit all sorts of election related violence is a major challenge to credible and transparent elections in Nigeria. This position is understandable because a credible, peaceful and fair election engenders a peaceful and legitimate means of political succession. Moreover, electoral violence as the ultimate form of electoral fraud is an aberration as well as anathema to the fundamental tenets of democracy: it deprives the people voice in governance; it stalls communication between the politicians (government) and citizens; it has encouraged political apathy and indifference of the citizenry; it makes government unrepresentative, unaccountable, unresponsive and irresponsible; it creates a conducive atmosphere for unscrupulous individuals to hijack the instrument of the state; and more importantly, it puts a big question mark on the legitimacy of the government. Even more worrisome is the fact that electoral violence, especially with youth's involvement in it, has become an established and "legitimate" mode of political behaviour in Nigeria.

### **The Role of Youths in 2015 Elections and Beyond**

Involvement of young people in the democratic process has been relatively poor in the run up to the 2015 general election. This is clear as has been made manifest in the low turnout of electorates – which constitutes mainly of youths – in previous general elections compared to the massive turn-out in the nations just concluded general elections. Some of the reasons which were identified as instigating voter apathy, particularly amongst youths inter alia;

- Youth view of electoral issues as a highly complex subject, disconnected or irrelevant or too removed" to their current lives and problems.
- Negative branding of politicians – (too many cartoons on the social and traditional media that brand politics negatively)
- Too many old bandwagon politicians (recycled politicians) in the political arena

- High skepticism about the capacity of the electoral process to deliver positive change: employment, voice, visibility, good governance
- Manifestoes were not youth-responsive: Majority felt that issues which were of importance to their age group were rarely on the political agenda of political parties
- Limited opportunities to participate in the political process
- Ignorance or lack of knowledge about the electoral process and how to participate;
- High costs associated with the electoral/political process
- Do or die politics
- Results do not reflect votes cast
- Electoral violence: politicians will find them willing tools for perpetration of all kinds of illegalities

The above painted scenario prompted INEC to live up to its responsibility of organizing workshops and seminars to educate the youths of their indispensable role in the electoral process such as electoral observers, polling officers, ad-hoc staffs in voting units, registration and confirmation of eligible voters via the use of the card reader etc. Several other organizations helped in this campaign which yielded positive result in engendering massive youth participation in the just concluded general elections. The role of the youths in the elections was further strengthened by the use or application of the social media where youths took advantage of their strong online presence to moderate series of group discussions illuminating how the youth can be actively encouraged to both register for, and vote during elections. This particular mechanism stands out as one the most vibrant discussion or communication tool foisted by youth groups on social networking sites where young Nigerian professionals around the world congregate on a daily basis to engage in robust intellectual debates and learning exchanges about social, political and economic governance issues in Nigeria and thereby determining the direction the election will go. The social media was particularly famed for its e-conferences, leveraging new media technology and crowdsourcing tools to promote public awareness and facilitate citizen engagement in policy and public decision-making processes.

Among several objectives, the social media which became a forum or channel for voter engagement agenda went beyond providing in-depth insight into all aspects of the electoral process, election administration, political party ideology, voting procedures and the declaration of results. Instead, it strategically combines election information delivery with the creation of spaces for engaging and interrogating intricate electoral issues and concerns, while drawing useful feedback from citizens. Up until the eve of the elections and even in the course of voting, youths continued to post and moderate group discussions in its Discussion and dishing-out information, targeting the voting populations, urging them to go out and vote regardless of the huge demotivating factors. The social media was also used to modify existing election information published by INEC, optimizing them for fast-and-easy reading and rapid online dissemination. Recognizing individual preferences and enthusiasm in the electoral process which was gaining momentum locally and internationally, specific social media platforms created special hastags, such as: #Nigeriadecides, #Votenigeria etc. were created to enable diverse online audiences interested in getting election updates to track and access that information with relative ease. Similarly, Facebook and Twitter timelines of private individuals with consistent high traffic were deployed to facilitate engagement and further expand the reach and spread of election information.

Generally speaking, 'youth' as commonly used in the Nigerian political parlance refers to persons within the 18-40 years age bracket, and this category of individuals played magnificent roles in the build up to the 2015 general elections and beyond. Youths through massive awareness created by the public, institutions of election (such as INEC and Civil Organizations) and promulgated by mostly the social and traditional media realized that Politics is relevant to young people and they must begin to feel and act as part of the process. It was perceived that education on politics and political issues would increase awareness and many also felt interest among their peer group thus providing an incentive to become more involved in the future. The YV blog published the gender distribution of the voting population, and highlighted the specific roles played by persons within the 18-40 age brackets in the elections. Also published were inspiring messages crafted urging young people to take active interest in political and electoral processes, as a medium for effecting social change and good governance. The general elections prominently featured the youth in many roles in the electioneering process: as aspirants at all level of governance, INEC adhoc staffs, election observers and monitors. The level of youth participation in this election is considered an improvement when compared to previous elections where young actors and voices were hardly visible. INEC also recruited thousands of members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) as adhoc staffs for the election. The use of NYSC members as ad hoc staff – who were mostly youths – was in line with the NYSC management's pledge to assist INEC in efforts to conduct hitch-free elections in the country. This in itself was a pragmatic shift from the use of few young adhoc staffs to compliment the older permanent staffs of INEC in the electioneering process.

### **The Youths Beyond 2015 General Elections**

The electoral process in Nigeria presents an enigma, giving the true application of an ideal electoral process; there is little or nothing to imply violence, which is endemic in reality. The reason for this is not far-fetched; it is hinged on the fact that the Nigerian state structure and those that operate its structure are largely bourgeois. This class of rulers lack economic base in its true sense, they therefore tend to use state apparatus to accumulate power for personal gain within the political economy. Accesses to political power therefore become a do or die affair. Violence, assimilation, religion, regionalism and ethnicity become veritable tools deployed by politicians in a bid to maintain and sustain themselves in power. The youths often come in handy in this regards as these scrupulous politicians often engage them to achieve this. Young people in Nigeria and indeed across the globe have always led social and political movements. It should therefore be the same in this circumstances we have found ourselves today. Young people should express their concerns and that of their communities through community services, their social activism should be made manifest in areas such as the environment, joblessness and political instability. For example students overwhelmingly consider political engagement as an effective way of solving important issues both in local communities and around the nation, this should be encouraged. Youth crusading should be hinged on the desire to maintain a balance by accepting contrary views without recourse to violence and should be maintained. Indeed, young people are positive assets to political and civil society. It is therefore important to note that to uphold and strengthen this position, voting for meritorious candidates rather than along religious and ethnic line should be the reason for participation. The end product of youth crusading should be to provide a forum where young people from different communities can learn to communicate with each other and dialogue with local, state and federal administrators. The bone of contention in this paper is to outline the salient ideals and roles of the youth in the nations' electoral processes, and the reality is that the place and participation of youths in our political processes cannot be overemphasized. For our democracy – or any other democracy for that matter – to be evocative, firm and functional, we must make youths an integral part of its processes. The youths who are often viewed as the future leaders have a right and responsibility to help shape that future and the quality of life that will be experienced therein. It is not ideal or appropriate for adults alone to decide on the balance between; war and peace, the priorities and strength of the economy or the manner the environment should be preserved. Therefore, young voters and voices are equally as essential in the body polity. As the biggest proportion of group in Nigeria, young people have often than not displayed a virile commitment to be more involved in policy making. Younger generations can boost economic cum political processes and they are the ones who will see the result of this revolutionary change they hope to bring about. To be able to make more impact in the future elections of the country, it is imperative to note here that youths are carried along in the processes of governance and are given a voice in the decision making processes of the country. It is also very important that this section of the society is equipped with adequate knowledge. The core areas where this empowerment can be given to the youths inter alia;

- Increased political and civil participation among the young, who are incurable optimists of the Nigerian dream. Thereby,
- Building an inclusive, transparent followership and,
- Drastically reduce the political apathy currently being experienced amongst youths and through public awareness educate massively on value of democracy and the imperativeness of the electoral process.

### **Youth Engagement in Electoral Processes: The Way Forward**

- **Equipping Youths through Education:** Equipping youths by educating them is predicated on the explicit relationship between knowledge and development and in the conviction that it is the key element in the development of a nations and its people. Empowering in this context captures the true essence of development – i.e. giving people the adequate knowledge to determine and fulfill their destiny accordingly (Okwechime 2003). Youths should be giving the opportunity to work for a better future for themselves through constructive engagement as opposed to the win at all cost mentality that is prevalent in the electioneering process. Civil societies and Electoral umpires such as INEC should set up workshops and seminars to encourage dialogue, especially were the ethnic divide is deep. The aim is to provide a platform for youths to discuss their concerns within democratic structure. As stated earlier, youth participation in decision making is very essential as decision taken at that level will make a significant difference at the local community level.
- **Youth Investment is Change Driven:** Various governments' should invest in youths by encouraging awareness amongst youths through thematic workshops. There should be divergent groups set up amongst these youths to help facilitate election processes and carry their communities along. The various youth groups should be engaged in concrete projects under the Ministry of youth so as to empower them financially. When done, political thuggery will no longer be a veritable venture. Developing a better understanding of young voters is an important first step in a young voter campaign strategy of the electoral

process. Investing in youth will be complete if the political gender inequality is addressed. The government should begin with working with young women in a bid to stimulate greater participation in the electoral process. Young women should be trained for election related skills. They should also conduct focus groups research to assess women's attitude and assist parties in developing strategies to target this audience in the lead-up to electoral processes. Women should play more active role in the effort to create awareness and empowerment in the political process.

- **Enhance Party Communication:** The increased random political assassination and hate speeches attest to the public dissatisfaction with governance and above all a show of complete disconnect between the political parties and their supporters. It is apparent that political parties have not been doing enough in the education of their followers to the strict adherence of rules and regulations guiding the political processes. It is also becoming clear that a majority of Nigerians believe that their expectations have not been met. Therefore, there should be improved political party communication to address the traditional lack of activity between elections.
- **Youths in Politics, Crusading and Social Justice:** As part of a build-up of youth in the political processes, youth should learn and acquire skills for campaign management, fund raising, recruitment etc. there should be focused effort on assisting youth party members to develop and implement coordinated electoral strategies and encourage voter participation. Youth activities should incorporate education of themselves, colleagues, families and friends about the current and important issues facing their communities. Apathy is dangerous – particularly amongst youths – participation in the nation's political process is a central belief within the teachings of our diverse traditions. As the nation continues to grow more diverse the need for diverse participation in the electoral process by the electorate becomes even more compelling, the country's leader must hear from younger generation during the electoral process. Voter registration and participation should not merely be encouraged but stressed as an absolute necessity. Youths should also engage in exchange in knowledge and expertise that would strengthen their participation in building democratic processes. Two out of the major critical observation advanced by Anifowose and Babawale (2003) is that 'the structure of the Nigerian federation is deficient thereby creating problems for the political processes and, that the need for further research into youth crusading is most essential.
- **Curbing the Menace of Youth Restiveness:** Prevention mechanisms including technical assistance, community-based services, inter-agency coordination and comprehensive data collection should be put in place. A youth violence prevention arm of government should be set up and the electoral umpire and civil society including political parties must do more in voter education to enhance the knowledge of electorates on the political processes. This and more can be achieved with the creation or establishment of youth initiative programmes such as;
  - Youth development and empowerment
  - Creating a mechanism to fund delinquency prevention and intervention programme
  - Support creative and aggressive implementation of activities to get young people involved in the electoral process
  - Create a youth development fund to generate grants to community youth based programmes that focus on youth development
  - Identify youth organizations that are community based and provide substantial benefits to them
  - Youth engagement in the civil process
  - Academic enrichment and monitoring etc.

## **Conclusion**

The paper examines the role of the youths in electoral processes, critically appraising the 2015 general elections and beyond. It was established that the role of youths in previous election building up to 2015 have been mostly violent. In most instances these violent roles are assigned to the youths by scrupulous politicians who have refused to absorb and practice essential democratic norms, values and tradition. It was also established that youths are vulnerable instruments of electoral violence as a result of dislocated and poor parental background, poor education, unemployment and underemployment, moral decadence and as well as political manipulations by an irresponsible political class. Moreover, the paper established that in the 2015 elections there was a twist to the role played by the youths, as most youths refused to be treated by the conventional way of being used as political thugs and agent of destruction. The paper holds that public awareness by INEC and civil societies helped in this regard, it also stresses that the explosion in the use of social media – and to an extent the traditional media – further boosted the above position. It was further established that every successful electoral process is dependent on youths; therefore, youths who are an integral part and the backbone to the economic and political growth of a society must be given top priority in times of empowerment and that since most youths that are perpetrators of electoral malpractices are either unemployed, uneducated and idle, that is why they are bamboozled to beat up political thuggery, this should be given strict attention and addressed.

## **Recommendations**

As it is traditional in any research endeavor that when problems are identified, solutions are proffered, proffering solutions takes the shape of recommendations. Recommendations are directed at providing the leeway to solving the research problem. It is against this background that the following recommendations are advanced;

- Proper implementation of national policies and laws that empower young people, and the combating of political corruption and abuse of office that hinders youth empowerment;
- Review of electoral laws and procedures to ensure fair and transparent elections and to assure public confidence;
- Revision of educational curricula to be more practical and skills-oriented and to include civic rights education;
- Fair and equitable management and distribution of public resources between the rich and poor;
- Engagement of young people in public management and leadership roles;
- Increased publicity for employment, community volunteering, and skills development opportunities for young people.

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