

Youth in Contemporary Politics: Roles and Benefits in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The youth in contemporary Nigerian politics has played the role of acting the political thug for older politicians in the country. In this study, the researchers set out to examine the role and benefits of the youth in modern-day politics with specific reference to the recent Nigeria's "Not-Too-Young-to-Run" Bill. It is in this light that this paper adopted Role theory in explaining the role of the youth in contemporary Nigerian politics. It is obvious that with the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill, the youth in Nigeria can now participate effectively in the nation's political processes, and not continue to play the dirty role of hooligan on the payroll of the sit-tight political leader who wants to perpetuate himself in power. The paper contends that the Federal government and the electoral umpire body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), should make it a priority to fully implement the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill, to give many more youths the opportunity to vie for electoral offices in the country. In addition, youths should be included in the nation's political processes by enlightening them on their role and benefits in such processes; not just to function as political thugs but to aspire to run for electoral offices themselves.

Keywords: Youth, Role Theory, Politics, Nigeria

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Youths are very relevant in virtually all areas of human endeavor, be it in the economic, social or political sphere. The role and benefits of the youth cannot be over emphasized when it relates to political development in particular. In contemporary politics, the youth has not fared better in the political scheme of things. Youths are the bedrock of any nation that desires political development. In Nigeria, the youth has been instrumental to contemporary politics as they have been involved in the political dynamics of Nigeria, but unfortunately have taken their political activism to the social media. They have formed one political movement or the other in contemporary times in the country. The first military coup in Nigeria was executed by youths who were barely in their late twenties. It could be recalled that "when Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzewowo attempted to seize power in a coup d'état in January 1966, the first shot he fired was aimed at self-seeking brigandage that had become public office in Nigeria" (Ikhu-Omoregbee, 2002). Those who executed the coup with him were youths. Some of these personalities include: Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna (aged 31), Major Adewale Ademoyega (aged 29), etc. Even General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian civil war leader, at age 29, who later became Military Head of State in 1966, was also a youth.

The political trend in most parts of the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s was towards the military take-over of government in which the soldier-statesman emerged from the barracks during political tension, to restore his country to social and political peace, as well as to attain economic stability (Ademoyega, 1981). The Youth has played institutionalized and political roles in recent times in Nigerian politics. With the recent "Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill" that was signed into law by President Muhammadu Buhari, youths were in the fore-front of the campaign and sponsor of the Bill. Initially, the Bill was met with politicking and stiff opposition from the *oldies* in the National Assembly who considered the youths to be over ambitious, passionate and desperate for power. This has ushered in tremendous change of attitude towards politics by the Nigerian youths.

With the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill in force, the youths in Nigeria have taken up the challenge to be involved in and run for elective post up to the office of president. This is a rare occurrence in Nigeria and has never before been witnessed by this generation of youths since the truncation of the first republic in 1966. Ebuzor (2018) noted that on 29 September 2018, Fela Durotoye emerged as the presidential candidate of the Alliance for New Nigeria (ANN). Other youths such as Omoyele Sowore of the African Action Congress (AAC), and Tope Fasua of the Abundant Nigeria Renewal Party (ANRP), among others, feature as frontline presidential candidates in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. Thus, to what benefits does the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill portend for the youth remains a question of scrutiny? It is on this background that this study is set to examine the role and benefits of youth in contemporary politics with specific reference to the Nigerian Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill.

1.2. Objectives of the Study:

The general objective of this study is to extrapolate the role and benefits which the youth will enjoy in Nigerian contemporary politics. While the specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the significant of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill in Nigeria,
2. Examine the role and benefits of youth participation in politics in the country, and
3. Proffer useful solutions that may promote the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill in the country.

1.3. Research Questions:

To give direction to this study the following research questions were raised:

1. What is the significant of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill in Nigeria?
2. What are the role and benefits of youth participation in politics in the country?
3. What are the possible solutions that can promote the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill in the country?

1.4. Research Method:

The study adopted qualitative research methods to analyze the role and benefits the youths enjoy in contemporary politics in Nigeria. This means that the data used in the study were collected from secondary sources which include textbooks, journal articles, official documents, internet materials, etc.

1.5. Theoretical Discourse:

The study adopted the "Role theory" to provide a vivid understanding or explanation of the concept "Youth" in contemporary politics. It can be argued that Role theory is not just a theory but a set of concepts and interrelated theories that are at the foundation of social science in general, and the study of the family in particular (Encyclopedia.com, 2003). This is why "roles are the building blocks of social institutions and social structures. From the structural perspective, roles are culturally defined norms-rights, duties, expectations, and standards of behaviour associated with a given social position" (Linton, 1945 cited in Encyclopedia.com, 2003). It is a culturally defined norms-right that there are social positions that cannot be held by the youth due to duties, expectations and standards of behaviour which are associated with such positions. These culturally defined norms-rights have relegated youths to the background in social institutions and structures. But in Nigeria, the signing into law of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill by President Muhammadu Buhari has provided the platform for Nigerian youths to contest for higher political offices with a handful vying for the office of president of the Federal Republic while a significant others vie for other equally high and respected political offices in the country.

2.1. Conceptual Clarification:

2.1.1 Youth and Politics:

The concept "Youth" is very strategic and central to this discourse. The term implies young people. According to UN definition, youth are young people between 15 and 24 years of age. Each country might have its own definition of youth, but from the researchers' perspective "Youths" in Nigeria are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria aged between 18 and 35 years (Okuchukwu, 2015) whereas, in general terms, in the African age-grade traditions, the youth may fall between the age bracket of between 18 and 49, depending on the society (cf. Chukwu, 2013). However, Politics is defined as the struggle for power and consolidation of power by individuals and groups within a state. It is seen that the political elites mobilize the pool of unemployed youths, often along the lines of ethnic, religious and party affiliations, and recruit them as political thugs to perpetrate violence mostly in periods of election (See Usman, 2009; Okechukwu, 2015). The youth has greatly been involved in contemporary politics in the electoral process in various countries of Africa of which Nigerian youths cannot be exempted. Unemployment seems to persist among youths in Africa, despite their involvement in the electoral processes. Okojie (2003), in her studies on the consequences of youth unemployment in Africa, noted that "an unwholesome aspect of youth unemployment and underemployment in many cities in Africa is visible 'idleness', whereby youths congregate at bars and eating places to drink or converse or smoke marijuana, for substantial parts of the day". Youth unemployment in Africa has also promoted "gangsterism" as many youths now run criminal enterprises and engage in public violence, armed robbery, car snatching, illegal fuel sales, illegal importation of arms, and many of these

antisocial behaviour of the youth has reached alarming levels in several African cities (Okojie, 2003). In contemporary politics, even with the youth in complicity, "electoral fraud has been a recurring problem in Nigeria". It is believed that only rarely has the ballot reflected the will of the people with the youths in the employ of the old politician. This is why rigging puts the control and accountability of office holders and governance beyond the reach of voters (Ilo, 2011).

The fact that politics deals with power acquisition and allocation of resources, the instinct and urge for political violence becomes inescapable reality in social engineering. Again, discontent, strife action and social disaffection could be predisposing factors, as the influence of godfatherism in Nigerian politics has further entrenched the culture of violence within the political space (Onike, 2010). Youths are used by politicians to perpetrate political violence as a result of self enrichment (Okuchukwu, 2015). For instance, in 2018, some able bodied youths in the employ of politicians stormed the Nigerian National Assembly and took away by force the Mace which is the symbol of authority without security personnel apprehending the hoodlums. Nigeria witnessed the historic signing into law of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill. The bill was passed by the National Assembly in 2017 to alter sections 65, 106, 131, 177 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic. It was to reduce the age qualification for president from 40 to 30; governor from 35 to 30; senator from 35 to 30; House of Representatives membership from 30 to 25 and state House of Assembly membership from 30 to 25 (Premium Times, 2018).

3.1. An Examination of the Not Too Young to Run Bill

The Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill which has attracted the attention of the United Nations World Assembly was presented and sponsored in 2016 by Hon. Tony Nwulu, member representing Oshodi/Isolo, Lagos, at the Federal House of Representatives, and a chieftain of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), together with Senator Abdul Aziz Nyako in the Senate. Of note is the point that Tony Nwulu is one of the youngest lawmakers in the House of Representatives. A critical examination of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill revealed that the bill altered the provision of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and for other matters connected therewith (Onuoha, 2018; Adeyeye, 2018). The Bill that was signed into law by President Muhammadu Buhari is significant because it reduced the age limits of elective positions and thereby makes the youth to get more involved in political processes in the country. Section 65 (1) (a) and (b) was amended by substituting the provisions with new provisions as follows:

A person shall be qualified for election as a member of:

- A. The Senate, if he is a Citizen of Nigeria and has attained the age of thirty years;
- B. The House of Representatives, if he is a Citizen of Nigeria and has attained the age of twenty-five years.

It also altered section 65 (2) (b) with the provision which follows thus:

A person shall be qualified for election under subsection (1) of this section if:

- C. He is member of a political party and is sponsored by that party or he is an independent candidate.

The Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill also amended section 106 (b) and (d) by substituting the provisions with new provision as follows:

A person shall be qualified for election as a member of a House of Assembly if:

- D. He has attained the age of twenty-five years.
- E. He is a member of a political party and is sponsored by that party or he is an independent candidate.

Also section 131 (b) and (c) was amended by substituting the provisions with new provisions as follows:

A person shall be qualified for election to the office of the President if:

- A. He has attained the age of thirty.
- B. He is a member of a political party and is sponsored by that political party or he is an independent candidate.

Also, Section 177 (b) and (c) was amended by substituting the old and existing provision with a new one as follows:

A person shall be qualified for election to the office of the Governor of a state if:

- A. He has attained the age of thirty
- B. He is a member of a political party and is sponsored by that political party or he is an independent candidate.

The Bill is cited as Constitution (Alteration) Bill, 2016. This Bill seeks to alter sections 65, 106, 131, 177 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) to reduce the age qualification for the office of the President and Governor and membership of the Senate and House of Representatives and the state House of Assembly. The Bill also seeks to allow independent candidacy in Nigeria's electoral process. The passage of the bill has generated arguments in favour and against the bill. Arguments canvassed in favour of the bill were predicated on the following grounds:

1. Given the global trend such a bill is timely;
2. It gives equal opportunities for the young and old;
3. It will give room for the young people to contribute their quota to development;
4. It brings about inclusiveness in the system;
5. It supports the majority (i.e. young people) in the country under democracy to have their way in vying for elective offices; and
6. It is in line with global standards and international best practices.

On the other hand, arguments proffered against the bill were that:

1. Leadership requires experience that the young people do not have;
2. The country is enmeshed in a myriad of problems which the young people do not have the experiences to handle;
3. The root of the country's problems could be traced to young persons who assumed leadership immediately after independence whose misrule brought about the first coup in the country also led by young army Majors that ushered in successive military regimes; and
4. Most of the past and present leaders at all levels of government were/are below sixty years of age, and could be regarded as young people; so, there will be no basis for the bill to be passed into law (Onwughalu & Obiorah, 2018).

3.2. Roles and Benefits of Youth Participation in Politics in the Country:

In view of the consequences of the foregoing scenario, agitation for reduction of age limits for elective positions in the country has coalesced into a global movement and campaign seeking also for provision for independent candidacy. Onwughalu & Obiorah (2018) noted that young person's participation in politics and in the decision-making process is a function of inclusive political space which the National Democratic Institute (2016) defined as the avenues, opportunities and entry points available for citizens to express their voice and influence political processes and outcomes. The youth has played significant roles in the political space despite being relegated to the background of the electoral process. With the reduction of age qualifications, the youth is now gainfully involved in the political process of Nigeria. The role of youths in contemporary politics is immense as they have been able to sponsor a bill to the alterations of the Constitution which saw to its amendment in their favour through the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill. This age reduction of political office aspirants to electoral positions is of great benefit to the youths as it would give them more passion to run for the political process. Even as a consequence to the alterations of the Constitution, youths can now contest for elective positions as independent candidates without being sponsored by a political party.

3.2.1 Elective Offices and Age Specifications in Nigeria

S/ N	Elective Offices	Present Ages	Proposed Ages
1.	President	40 years	30 years
2.	Senate	35 years	30 years
3.	House of Representatives	30 years	25 years
4.	Governor	35 years	30 years
5.	State House of Assembly	30 years	25 years

Retrieved from Obioha, J. I. (2017)

With the bill signed into law, the youths can now contribute immensely to the electoral process because the age qualifications had hitherto hindered them greatly from participating more in politics and elective positions. Hopefully, this change would bring about inclusiveness of the youths in contemporary politics in Nigeria.

4.1. Conclusion:

The Nigerian youths in contemporary politics have not been carried along by the elderly in terms of electing individuals to positions of leadership in the country. But with the passage and signing into law of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill by President Muhammadu Buhari, the youths, instead of being used as political thugs, would now be given a platform to aspire for any political position they so desire. The 2019 presidential election has witnessed the aspirations of young people such as Fela Durotoye and a handful others in the political space as presidential candidate while a significant others aspire for lesser positions both at the federal and state levels.

5.1. Recommendations:

It is in view of the above that this study recommended as follows:

1. Implementation of the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill:

The federal government and its electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), should

make it a priority to fully implement the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Bill; to give more Youths the chance to contest for electoral offices in the country at all levels.

2. Youth Inclusiveness in the Political Process:

The youth should be included in the political process by enlightening them on their role and benefits in the political process not as political thugs but as candidate for electoral offices in Nigeria.

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