

Ageism as a threat to democracy

By Auscar Wambiya

Defined as prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, ageism in politics has increasingly reared its ugly head in the recent days raising concerns on its long term possible effect on democracy as we have known it until now. With democracy having been understood as a rule by the majority, instances of discrimination based on age threatens the people's inalienable right to freely contest for political positions or cast their vote for individuals freely expressing interests on such political positions.

Just like clannism, tribalism, nepotism, regionalism or any other 'ism', ageism deliberately ignores individual qualifications, competence, skill set and capacity to contest for, actually win and execute the requirements of a particular office and alienates one based purely on the age. Instead of asking for what one can do, ageism goes for how old one is. Whether young, old or in between, history has shown that individuals have performed different roles assigned to them or vied for by them, with age playing a minority role on their effectiveness in the said roles hitherto.

Take for instance Theodore Roosevelt, the youngest person to ever become President of the United States of America at age 42. He is credited with major successes including the 'Square Deal' that ended the anthracite coal strike of 1902, the recognition of Panama as a republic and the building of the Panama Canal, the thawing of race relations by inviting Booker T. Washington to the White House among several other achievements at such a minority age. Imagine if Theodore Roosevelt would have been discriminated against based on age.

Yet Jomo Kenyatta, the founding President of Kenya who came to office at an advanced age of over 70 years, midwived the colonial rule and the independence government, established the foundation of Kenya as we know it now and steadied the various ambitions and political interests that threatened the newly independent Kenya despite his age being in the majority. The United States of America currently has President Joe Biden at 79 years and House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi at 81 years both leading the world's bastion of democracy tremendously well.

While youth comes with energy, verve and vigor, old age comes with wisdom and knowledge accumulated from experience, learning and listening hence the need to accommodate both in a nation as diverse as Kenya. The young need the old and vice versa. Discriminating individuals based on their age only serves to exclude a critical component of the society in the decision making processes that will ultimately affect them. This is dictatorship and not democracy. If and when they are few, democracy requires that the old are given their say even as the majority have their way. This is not possible if they are talked down against and prevented from presenting their interests to be subjected to the electoral process. Even if they lose in such contests, let it be that they lost not because of their age but their inabilities.

It will be remembered that throughout history, individuals and nations have fought tooth and nail with some like Martin Luther King Jnr. Paying the ultimate price in the process so that discrimination of all forms do not exist in this universe. In South Africa, for almost a century, the

white minority rule institutionalized discrimination against the black majority through the apartheid system that set back the country a great deal as talented individuals were not allowed to exercise their capacities based on their color. Rosa Parks was intimidated for fighting against this forms of discrimination in the United States of America. Ageism is no different.

Discrimination based on age will see individuals with skills and specialized competencies excluded from the mainstream decision making organs of the society thereby setting us back several years. This is even worse considering all the investments that are made on individuals over time by the state, family or friends only to be rendered useless at their prime on the basis of advanced age. Unfortunately, the youth who keep demanding for increased involvement in the democratic affairs of the nation and complain for being discriminated against have turned out to be the loudest critics of those in advanced age who are offering themselves for election in this year's August contest. How people can complain for being discriminated against while discriminating others in the process is the highest level of hypocrisy known to man. Let the political contests be open to all and sundry based on abilities and not age. After all, politics is a battlefield of ideas, not a gym to prove ones physical prowess.

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