

YOUTH AND ELECTION

Young people make up about 60% of Africa's population (UN Youth 2010) and about 58% of Ghana's voting population. Projections are that the youth aged 18 to 35 years will constitute over 65% of the 2016 voting populations. However, this important segment of the population is not only vulnerable to be exploited as *Macho Men* due to unemployment, but they also lack understanding of electoral and campaign issues. In this regard, the continued absence of coordinated youth-focused educational programmes to simplify election debates and sensitize them on non-violent participation leaves much to be desired of.

As Ghana's 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections drew closer, there was a heightened anxiety and fear among several people and followers of democracy across the globe owing to the fact that Elections in Africa have often yielded some of the dreaded conflicts the continent as seen in the past few years. Examples abound in Kenya, Ivory Coast and other parts of the continents are few examples of how far elections can go in Africa.

Ghana has no doubt received the praise of international observers as the model of democracy in Africa. Ghana which ranked 31st in the world in relations to youth participation in politics as reported by the Commonwealth Youth Development Index 2016, have in previous years seen many young people play key roles in the peaceful outcomes of elections. Despite the narrow margin wins which characterized Ghana's elections in the past years, young people in the country have perfectly managed to avoid violence and where vast disagreement existed, the law courts were duly used to resolve several of the disputes that emerged along the way.

Empirical evidence suggest that young people have been victims of radicalization and instrumentalisation in most political processes across the continent and the world. The greatest fear sets in for Ghana most especially with some of the recent trend across the continent where elections have ended with violence and conflict. The case of Ivory Coast, Burundi and many others are glaring examples of these fears. Are politicians in Ghana going to copy from these sad examples to perpetrate violence during this upcoming election? OR Are our Ghanaian Youth going to copy from the Nigerian example (in 2015 elections) to maintain peace?

THE WINNER OF THE POLLS: A DECISION OF THE YOUTH?

The overwhelming participation of young people in the Nigerian 2014 election and its peaceful outcome despite the results remains a huge inspiration to countries across Africa. The candidate who makes the case to bring solution to the current socio-economic and geo-political problem (corruption, unemployment, poor health facilities, just to name a few) facing young people and the entire Ghanaian population will obviously become the candidate whom majority of the people will vote for. The rising discontent by the opposition party and Ghanaian citizens on the efforts so far in solving this problem remains a growing threat for possible youth radicalization and violence (the recent clashes between supporters of the two main parties are clear evidence of this fear). The World Bank in a 2016 report clearly highlights youth unemployment (age 15-24) to be at an alarming rate of 48% and this a major security time bomb awaiting to explode. This notwithstanding, there is no doubt the solution bearer (based on proposed policies during campaign) will win the support of the youths as well as have a higher possibility to win this upcoming elections. Many young people have sat on the 'fence' in previous years, perhaps it's time we all rise and make a decision on our future. Perhaps the increasing levels of unemployment should be a motivation for several young people to make a decision on the best party and candidate with the right solution to tackle the ever increasing levels of unemployment.

The future of Ghana lies in the hands of the current generation of young people. Ghana has come a long way since the onset of the fourth republic to be sent back into the dungeon of darkness and chaos. The youth therefore have a major role to play in promoting peace, before, during and after the polls. There are no doubt politicians and some selfish unpatriotic individuals will make all attempts to recruit as many young people to foment violence. Young people must however, be careful not to fall for these tricks. The future of Ghana is bigger ambitions any individual to warrant chaos in this country. As young people we must remember we have a great future ahead of us and posterity will never forgive us if we allowed ourselves to be agents in plunging this country into chaos. If we fall prey to follow some of the ageing politicians and detractors to ferment violence, it is obvious that our generation will suffer more. It is obvious our generation is quite versed with the social media and of course we are of the 'android generation'. The social media is a great tool we can use to reach out to our fellow peer and call for peace throughout the country during this period.

TAKING A STAND AGAINST MANIPULATION

Deborah Thornton, a professional associate in the public affairs section at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia, recently helped facilitate sessions for young women on elections and democracy that included using the YALI Network's online course "Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility." She said at the end of the sessions the women resoundingly voiced their opposition to violence. "The kids in general don't want fighting," she said, and one big reason is their shared experience of conflict. "They've all lived and their families have lived through what happened with the 20 years of civil war, and they understand how that violence can get out of control ... and they don't want to go back. They're looking to go forward," Thornton said. That kind of feeling was exhibited in Nigeria's 2015 election with the "Vote Not Fight" campaign, where young people joined with the media, artistic community, civil society and nongovernmental organizations in a mass mobilization to demonstrate "the will of the people to see the elections go peacefully," Jobbins said. "From the most elite to the ordinary people, there was a recognition that the elections risked being contentious and everyone needed to do their part to prevent that and to accept the result," he said. The campaign's success surprised many observers who had predicted a bloody process.

PARAMOUNT CHIEF ADVICES YOUTH

The paramount chief of Dunkwa-on-Offin in the Central Region, Nana Obeng Nuako II, has advised the youth of this country to shun violence as the presidential and parliamentary elections approaches. He said politicians who incite the youth to violence should be named, shamed and blacklisted, and such politicians should not be given the opportunity to be part of the political campaign of any political party. Speaking in an interview at his Dunkwa-on-Offin palace on Independence Day, Nana Nuako II urged the youth to remain vigilant and calm as the political season approaches and they should also have the interest of the country at heart.

"Politicians come in different types and it is very important for our sons and daughters to be very careful and vigilant so as not to allow themselves to be used by politicians to promote their (politicians) parochial agenda" he said. "Ghana is the only place we call home and it is incumbent on all of us, particularly our youth to protect this home and make it safer for all of us to continue to enjoy our lives" Nana Nuako II added. He also admonished the youth to be influenced by the campaign messages politicians "sell" to them and not be influenced by cash and other incentives given out by people seeking to occupy political offices.

“Politicians who do not campaign on important issues that border on the development of the nation but rather preach hatred and attempt to buy the loyalty of the electorates can never be trusted” he said. The Dunkwahene also appealed to the leadership of all the political parties to call to order their members who go wayward during the campaign period so as to preserve the unity, peace and dignity of this country. He said traditional authorities in the country would not sit and look on, but they would also take up the task of preaching peace to their subjects especially at all gatherings”.

“The effects of war are there for all of us to see, and peace can remain in Ghana through our collective efforts and this means that we all have a role to play in sustaining our peace and tranquility for the prosperity of our country” Nana Nuako II concluded.

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