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Spotlighting youthful presidential candidates in Africa: Attitudes and practices with young and youthful political aspirants

Musa Kika

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Introduction

With young people constituting the largest and fastest-growing demographic grouping in Africa, Africa has the youngest population on the globe and is set to maintain that status. Africa's population will be 1.6 billion by 2030, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the rapidly growing youth population will constitute 42% of that number. Yet despite these numbers, African has the oldest leadership globally. Young people's political power has not reflected their demographics. The average age of African leaders is 62, which means that the continent with the youngest citizens has the oldest rulers.¹ The African Youth Charter defines "youth" as being between the ages of 15 and 35 years, but this brief uses the term "young people" in a contextual manner to refer generally to younger contenders of political office relative to those advanced in age.² A 2015 article appearing on CNN noted that the average age of the ten oldest leaders in Africa was 78.5 compared to 52 for the world's ten most-developed economies.³ The issue of old leaders is coupled with that of long-serving leaders. These include Paul Biya, 89, who has been in power in Cameroon for 39 years; Teodoro Obiang, 80, who has ruled Equatorial Guinea since 1979; and 81-year-old Abdelaziz Bouteflika who, although confined to a wheelchair for some five years, intended to seek a fifth presidential term in Algeria, only to be stopped by his death in 2019. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe was only stopped by a coup in 2017 at 93, having ruled for 37 years.

The youth stepping up

In today's Africa, however, the fact that most heads of state are older than the median is not attributed to young people not stepping up for the top office. A number have challenged older contenders but the trends emergent suggest systemic challenges, which in turn tend to suppress the number of aspirants. It does not help that, as the case studies illustrate, most young political party leaders are in the opposition. Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed, who was elected Prime Minister at 41, is an exception. A few prominent examples of the young running for presidential office are worth mentioning. In Rwanda in 2017, the rule of 60-year-old Paul Kagame was challenged by Diane Rwigara, a 38-year-old accountant. In Senegal in 2019, Ousmane Sonko ran for presidential office as the youngest of the five candidates at 45.⁴ In the 2018 general election in Zimbabwe, Nelson Chamisa at 40 ran against 76-year-old Emerson Mnangagwa. In the 2023 general elections, Emerson Mnangagwa at 81 is again likely to run against Nelson Chamisa, who will be 44.

South Africa will go to the polls in 2024, with President Cyril Ramaphosa at 71 potentially hoping to win a new mandate. A quarter of the eligible voters, over 10 million, will be under 30. One of the main opposition parties, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), will likely continue to have Julius Malema as its leader and presidential contender, who will be 43 then. In Uganda in 2021, 38-year-old Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (Bobi Wine) endured a gruesome campaign to challenge the long-serving and 76-year-old Yoweri Museveni in a country where two-thirds of registered voters are younger than 30. The elections were in large part generational and, as the Washington Post aptly described it: "the contest between the grandfatherly incumbent and the spindly singer-turned-politician, Bobi Wine, has come to embody the most essential of democratic divides: change vs. stability, idealism vs. wisdom, the frustrated young vs. the fearful old".⁵

¹ Jason Burke "Young Africa: new wave of politicians challenges old guard" 21 September 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/young-africa-new-wave-of-politicians-challenges-old-guard>

² African Union, African Youth Charter, Commenced on 8 August 2009, <https://agp.africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/charter/2006/african-youth/eng@2006-07-02>

³ David E Kiwuwa, Africa is young. Why are its leaders so old? CNN, 29 October 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/15/africa/africas-old-mens-club-op-ed-david-e-kiwuwa/index.html>

⁴ Désiré Kanon, "Meet Senegal's youngest presidential candidate, Ousmane Sonko," 18 February 2019, Africanews, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/02/18/meet-senegal-s-youngest-presidential-candidate-ousmane-sonko/>

⁵ Halima Athumani and Max Bearak, "Uganda's election shapes up as a contest of young vs. old" 10 January 2021, The Washington Post,

The context is that most voters are in fact youths per the definition of the African Youth Charter. In Zimbabwe, or instance, sixty percent of Zimbabwe's 5.3 million registered voters in the 2018 elections were under 40, according to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. In South Africa's 2024 national elections, a quarter of the eligible voters, over 10 million, will be under 30. It would thus seem a natural trajectory for young people to dominate the list of electoral contenders, but that is not the case.

Support for youthful contenders at AU

There is no legal or policy bar at African Union level for young people to run for the highest office, or indeed any elected office. Quite the contrary: the policies in fact encourage it. The *AU Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* in Aspiration 5 states that "Africa's women and youth shall play an important role as drivers of change. Inter-generational dialogue will ensure that Africa is a continent that adapts to social and cultural change".⁶ Aspiration 6 envisages "An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children". Aspiration 6 has the following key provisions:

49. We aspire that by 2063, Africa has engaged and empowered youth.
[...]
54. The youth of Africa shall be socially, economically and politically empowered through the full implementation of the African Youth Charter.
55. Africa will be a continent where the talent of the child and the youth will be fully developed, rewarded and protected for the benefit of society.
56. All forms of systemic inequalities, exploitation, marginalization and discrimination of young people will be eliminated and youth issues mainstreamed in all development agendas.
[...]
58. Young African men and women will be the path breakers of the African knowledge society and will contribute significantly to innovation and entrepreneurship. The creativity, energy and innovation of Africa's youth shall be the driving force behind the continent's political, social, cultural and economic transformation.

Agenda 2063 recognises that "No society can reach its full potential, unless it empowers women and youth and removes all obstacles to women's full participation in all areas of human endeavours. Africa must provide an enabling environment for its women, children and young people to flourish and reach their full potential."

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in Article 13 states that:

1. Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with the provisions of the law.
2. Every citizen shall have the right of equal access to the public service of his country.⁷

Article 31 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance states that "State Parties shall promote participation of social groups with special needs, including the Youth and people with disabilities, in the governance process".⁸

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/uganda-election-youth-vote/2021/01/07/54a9bd6e-4db9-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html

⁶ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The African We Want*, https://au.int/Agenda2063/popular_version

⁷ African Union, African charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Commenced on 21 October 1986, <https://agp.africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/charter/1981/human-and-peoples-rights/eng@1981-06-27>

⁸ African Union, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, Commenced on 15 February 2012 <https://agp.africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/charter/2007/democracy-elections-and-governance/eng@2007-01-30>

The African Youth Charter which is specific on youth is crafted from the position of pushing back youth marginalisation, and the recognition that the youth “are partners, assets and a pre-requisite for sustainable development”. There are provisions in the Charter which require State Parties to guarantee participation of the young in governance processes at various levels, including elected office (Article 11: Youth Participation). Importantly, the Charter in Article 26(j) places a responsibility on the youth to “Defend democracy, the rule of law and all human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

The illustrative cases above of Rwanda, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Africa show that the young are stepping up. In Nigeria, the youth-led 2016 *No Too Young to Run* Campaign shows that the appetite to drive youth representation is there. When Cameroon headed for local and parliamentary elections in November 2019, young people organized country-wide protests against the ageing political leadership.

In the end, Jason Burke's conclusion is correct: “A wave of young politicians and activists are challenging ageing leaders across much of Africa, reflecting seismic shifts on the continent that are poised to dramatically change the lives of hundreds of millions of people. The new generation of politicians are in their mid-30s and can barely remember the cold war or the conflicts that brought many autocrats or ruling parties to power. Often educated and urban, they are at the intersection of massive changes that experts say may dramatically strengthen democracy in Africa in decades to come”.⁹

But there are obstacles.

Hinderances to youth running for office

Resistance

As has been observed by many, young people suffer few or no opportunities to emerge as candidates for elective offices, on account of their age and limited experience. Even with less chances of winning, young candidates are facing significant resistance from incumbent rulers, “who are sometimes more than twice their age and are backed by political organisations in power for decades, well-armed militaries, brutal security services and entrenched systems of patronage that have captured massive resources”.¹⁰ Ironically, because of the population demographics, the youth vote is determinative of the election outcomes in most counties. Many political leaders seem keen to accept having the youth vote, but not youthful candidates. Unsurprisingly, Nigeria's 2016 *Not Too Young to Run* campaign was powered by the slogan “If you're old enough to vote, you're old enough to run!” Voting age is 18 in most AU member states.

Systemic barriers

After the *Not Too Young to Run* campaign the Nigerian government ratified a constitutional amendment that reduced the age limit for state legislators and those in the federal House of Representatives from 30 years to 25 years; for senators and governors from 35 to 30; and for the president from 40 to 35. Sadly, the opposite is the prominent example across the continent. The old have been keeping out the young by removing or changing constitutional presidential term limits to secure more time in office and removing presidential age limits to achieve the same. According to

⁹ Jason Burke “Young Africa: new wave of politicians challenges old guard’ 21 September 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/young-africa-new-wave-of-politicians-challenges-old-guard>

¹⁰ Jason Burke “Young Africa: new wave of politicians challenges old guard’ 21 September 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/young-africa-new-wave-of-politicians-challenges-old-guard>

the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, presidential term limits were changed 47 times in 28 countries from April 2000 to July 2018, with at least six failed attempted changes.¹¹ In 23 cases, spread over 19 countries, the changes strengthened term limits by introducing or imposing stricter temporal boundaries on presidential mandates, but in 24 instances in 18 countries, the temporal restrictions on holding presidential office were removed or loosened. The changes in term limits have been executed in four different ways. The first set of amendments extended the length of presidential terms of office: from five to seven years in Guinea (2001), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (2002), Rwanda (2003) and Burundi (2018); and from five to six years in Chad (2018). Presidential terms were also extended in instances of intra-state conflict and capacity problems when elections were postponed in South Sudan (2015 and 2018) and the DRC (2016). Second, the number of terms in which a person may hold presidential office were increased, such as from two to three terms in the DRC (2015). Third, changes were made to reset the clock for the incumbent president, as were witnessed in Zimbabwe (2013), the DRC (2015), and Rwanda (2015), where the incumbents had reached their absolute term limits but argued that a new or revised constitution enabled them to start with fresh mandates unrestricted by previous constitutional limits. Fourth, term limits were removed altogether in Guinea (2001), Togo (2002), Tunisia (2002), Gabon (2003), Chad (2005), Uganda (2005), Algeria (2008), Cameroon (2008), Niger (2009) and Djibouti (2010).

Rhetoric of immaturity and doing third party bidding

Traditional African belief is that with age and longevity in office come wisdom, foresight and experience, and this has been imported into politics, opportunistically and self-servingly so by the political leaders. But there are also still huge constituencies who hold fast to this thinking, in the process stifling the emergence of credible youthful successors. The young have been cast as lacking the ideological orientation that liberated the continent from colonial rule, as completely ideologically bankrupt, or as agents of western imperialist forces, such that voting for them is seen as a vote for destabilization and a return to the troubles of colonialism.

Naked violence and use of State system

Violence and intimidation have also affected young people running for office. Bobi Wine in Uganda was arrested three times since announcing his candidature in the recent election; he was under house arrest even after the election results were announced in favour of incumbent Yoweri Museveni. Wine's home and offices were repeatedly sealed off by police, and his rallies dispersed. His bodyguard was killed. In Zimbabwe, Nelson Chamisa's supporters and party are at the receiving end of State violence, with his party leaders arrested and his rallies barred, even in the face of court orders for the rallies to proceed. In Rwanda, the 38-year-old Diane Rwigara, who ran against 60-year-old Paul Kagame, ended up in jail on charges of inciting insurrection and forgery, later to be acquitted.

Yet the wave of young people stepping up seems irreversible, and rightly so. Elections on the continent are increasingly yielding younger candidates than ever before. For legislative bodies especially, elections are producing younger elected leaders. In 2019 in Uganda, for instance, Proscovia Oromait was only 19 when she became the world's youngest MP. In 2011 in South Africa, Lindiwe Mazibuko was elected leader of the opposition in parliament aged 37, representing the Democratic Alliance. She became the first black woman to hold that position. Later, in the 2019 general elections, the ANC's Itumeleng Ntsube made history by becoming the youngest member of parliament in the country's history, at age 20. Joana Mamombe is Zimbabwe's youngest MP, elected at age 25 in 2018. In Botswana, Bogolo Kenewendo was elected MP in 2016 at age 29, and was

¹¹ Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, Presidential term limits in Africa: what should be done? 9 February 2021, <https://osisa.org/termlimits-in-africa>.

appointed Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry two years later in 2018, becoming the youngest cabinet member. There are other examples.

The work ahead

If young people's demographics are to be reflected in their political power, as should happen, much work lies ahead.

Civil society should accelerate work to capacitate and support young people in aspiring and working towards running for political office. This should not only be left to youth organisations or those working with young people in elections. Civil society must hold the AU to account and put pressure on states to operationalise the AU statutes and guidelines on the participation of young people in political activity, including running for office. Broadly, communities must be educated on the value of the young in governance, considering the increasing "youthening" of the world, and the need for innovation, new ideas and youthful energy. This includes working against the rhetoric of immaturity that is thrown at young people, youthfulness itself being a ground of discrimination which in many countries is expressly proscribed.

Governments must desist from amending constitutional term limits and presidential age limits upwards. Rather, the age must be lowered. The rhetoric of youth as immature or unstable must be dropped. Much work must be done to end the use of violence and coercive state power and resources to prevent young people from running. Governments must also put in place government funded programmes to encourage youth participation in political governance and in electoral contestation as candidates. This includes incentivising participation of young people and advancing their access to information on political participation and running for office.

The AU's Africa Governance Architecture (AGA) has much to do. The AGA must operationalise the African Governance Architecture Youth Engagement Strategy (AGA-YES), a guiding framework for AU Policy Organs and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to ensure sustainable engagement of youth in democratic governance processes within the AGA framework, including supporting young people's participation as candidates and not just as voters. The AGA Youth Engagement Strategy should also expressly and comprehensively address youth participation as candidates in electoral processes. AGA must produce a measuring scorecard for member states' compliance with AU statutes addressing participation of young people in elected office, at all levels of political leadership. AGA must also put in place government funded programmes to encourage youth participation in political governance and in electoral contestation as candidates. This includes incentivising and supporting member states to establish and operationalise such measures.

Youth wielding political and economic power is central to securing a future that speaks to the needs and desires of young people, and the changed world of today and tomorrow. The discussion of youth running for presidential office has only been used to exemplify and illustrate the attitudes and practices towards young people running. There would be some variances where youth run for lower offices, such as the position of territorial governor or as members of legislative bodies, but the general attitudes towards young people running for political office tend to be similar. The issues identified here thus apply, with equal force, as far as running for office at other levels is concerned. The youth are not short of aspirations. One of the youthful presidential candidates had this to say: "It is young people who are the movers and shakers. We want to also see that in politics. We want our continent to be painted young. We want our continent to have a young voice". Instead, the old may be lacking in political will to open the space. The reality is that youth are the backbone of any socio-economic and political development, and failure or refusal to harness the creative talent and energy of the young in time spells inertia and even retrogression for African democracies and societies.

Author

Musa Kika, PhD is a constitutional and human rights lawyer, and currently serves as Executive Director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum.

About Data for Governance Alliance

The Data for Governance Alliance is a four-year project that promotes data-based advocacy and engagement between pan-African civil society organisations (CSOs) and African Union organs. The project is led by Afrobarometer with partners, including CDD Ghana, the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Laws.Africa. The project is funded by the European Union.



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