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Appraisal of the Role of Political Violence: The Development of Youths in Nigeria in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the relationship between Nigerian youths and political violence has been one of the issues for discussion in many fora within and outside Nigeria. Youths are being associated with political violence. The question is why are youths the central theme of political violence when they are the future leaders? Why do we have political violence when politics is meant to create enabling environment for service? The answers, perhaps, rest on the institutional structure of the country. However, the sources for this essay come from primary and secondary sources – oral interviews, books, journals, newspapers, magazines. The paper uses historical analysis as its methodology. The findings indicate that youths are not given proper attention in the Nigerian project – they are unemployed and underemployed; they lack food, lack good and affordable education, do not have access to good and affordable medical facilities, are not always consulted in decision making that affects the nation, on account of inverted values in democratic governance, and they are part of the insecurity challenges where they are themselves insecure. Because they are helpless, they become willing tools in the hands of “money bag” politicians especially during elections. The paper

concludes that for youths to be relevant in the 21st century development, and to reduce political violence, youths should be catered for adequately by governments at various levels; well-to-do private individuals should create enabling atmosphere for the youths to excel through creation of employment opportunities, provision of good and compulsory education, health facilities which should be free for all Nigerians, and provision of adequate shelter for all. Parents and the religious organisations should wake up and keep to their advisory roles. The government should create enabling environment for the practice of democracy based on the rule of law.

Introduction

Nigeria is by far a rich country and by economic structure and GDP is the second largest economy to Republic of South Africa in African continent. Nigeria has about 150 million people with the youths constituting about 51 percent. For many years especially since independence in 1960, Nigerian people have been struggling and hurrying to develop; Nigeria is fully aimed to belong to the comity of developed states and by extension one of the biggest economies in the world by 2020. But from the way and manner the economy is steaming, development has tended to elude the country.

However, it is accepted that 51 percent of the Nigerian people are made up of youths. The question may arise such as what is the quality of the youth population? Or how healthy is the population and what is the impact on development? Why are the Nigerian youths associated with political violence? Nigerian youths become associated with political violence because of the economic and social conditions of the environment. Political violence is not a recent phenomenon. It has been part of the Nigerian life even before independence. Since then, it has become part and parcel of the culture of the people. The social and economic conditions of the youths include unemployment, poverty, lack of good education and institutional structures, lack of access to modern facilities that make life worth-living.

Curiously, politics was meant to serve the people but these youths become disconnected and helpless, and when connected negatively or thinly connected, they become pawns and willing tools in the hands of political power-seeking people. It is against this background that the present Nigerian youths find themselves.

On the other hand, violence is one of the most discussed issues within and outside Nigeria. This is so because of the havoc and misery it has brought to families and groups and by extension nation states whether developed or developing ones such as Nigeria now. Violence has impacted negatively on the psyche of states negatively. Indeed, in Nigeria of recent violence has been occurring daily. Violence is being reported in our streets, towns, villages and our communities. Such violence includes ethnic and religious, community violence, political violence among others.

Indeed, political violence had been and is still a hallmark in the power politics of the nation. Before independence in 1960, there was political violence in Nigeria that ushered in self-rule. At independence and post independence epochs political violence has been a recurring decimal. Electioneering campaign that ushered in Nigeria's independence witnessed enormous political violence. It was political violence in the then Western Region of Nigeria that contributed to the military coup of 1966 (Crowder; 1978). In 1979, 1983, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2011 general elections were marred by violence (Crowder, 1978). The participants in all the violence are both the politicians and non-politicians. The carriers of this plague are (were) usually youths who are strong and perhaps have no stake in the political business of the state. At the end, the nation is negatively in for it.

The work is divided into four sections, section one deals with introduction, conception of youths, violence and political violence, section two deals with the causes of youth violence, while section three discusses the impact on the society and the last section talks about conclusion and recommendation.

Understanding the Youths

Youth is a difficult concept to explain; many people see it quite differently. However, the United Nations' Organisation defines "youth as persons between the age of 15 and 24" (Obebode, 2011). On the economic rating and production within the system, Professor Akpan H. Ekpo, an economist defined youths as persons between the ages of 17 and 35 years. In this connection, they are supposed or in fact are strong as well as being able to give and take the best society can offer. The Nigerian Constitution defines youths as people between the ages of 18 and 30 years. That explains the fact that at 18 years, one can contest or vote for or file for an elective position or office in governance. In the areas of interaction, the World Football Body, Federation of International Football Association FIFA defines youths as people between the ages of 17 and 20 years (Niyi, 2011; Ekpo, 2011; FIFA, 1985; Nigeria Constitution).

Conceptualizing Violence and Political Violence

Violence is the term that is often difficult to give a precise meaning. Anifowose (1982) sees violence as an illegal and illegitimate acts carried out by non-government individuals and groups. Acts that are not authorized by the constituted authority undermine the existing norms and values of the society. He also puts that violence involves legitimate intervention of the authorities (government) especially their repressive forces – because they find their interests or those of their allies, threatened by the actions of dissident groups, for instance, civil violence, which always involve police and soldiers. Tamuno (1991) explains violence as an unlawful use or despair and desperation – a tragedy of errors with various sub-plots.

Political violence is the breakdown of consensual norms, political alienation and the cohesiveness of a ruling group; a response to frustrating circumstances (Azeez, 2005). Anifowose (1982), defines political violence as the use of threat of physical act carried out by an individual or group of individuals within a political system against another individual or individuals, and/or property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage or destruction to property; and whose objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances, implementation, and effects have political significance, that is, tend to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangement of a power structure that has some consequences for the political system.

Youth violence therefore condones a reaction through the use of force owing to frustration and despair to draw attention of the authorities (government) to their needs or change the course of action of government seen as inimical for development. It may take the form of arson, torture, kidnapping, killing by any means, destruction of property, blocking of ways, etc.

Genesis of Political Crisis in Nigeria

The first major political violence in Nigeria took place in Kano. It is often referred to as the Kano riot of 1953 where people of northern origin engaged the southerners (the Yoruba and Igbo) in a bloody clash which resulted at a strained relationship among their leaders regarding the actual date to attain self-rule. Another crisis was recorded in 1962 in Western Nigeria, in 1964. Political crisis erupted again and since then, political crisis became a currency and a way of life. Mention could also be made of the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) under the leadership of Dr. Michael I. Okpara and the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) under the leadership of Sir Ahmadu Bello that later engaged themselves in serious conflicts as a result of power play which NNA was effectively in power, under the guise of Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). The crown prince of all Nigeria's political violence resulted in a 30 months civil war in Nigeria from 1967 – 1970. Nigeria had witnessed and perhaps the trend is still on the political violence as part of peoples culture.

Causes of Political Violence

Of recent, political violence is becoming more alarming than what was observed and felt in the late 1960s and 1980s. It is giving the right thinking Nigerians some form of nightmares and food for thought on ways of taming the hydra. However, there are various reasons advanced for the political violence in Nigeria, and perhaps these reasons vary from one or regions to regions. Some of the reasons put forward include poverty, unemployment, greed, sycophancy, godfatherism, injustice variant of interests among other things.

Youths and Poverty

Poverty translates to peoples hardly afford a meal a day, cannot clothe themselves, have no access to good drinking water, no access to basic education, no access to good shelter. To say the least, a person that lacks the basic means of living is considered poor. Poverty therefore includes hunger. Hunger is a condition in which persons do not have access to good food (diet), and perhaps can go for days without food and less hope in sight. This condition bestrides our society and common among students in higher institutions and rural dwellers with very poor economic background, low wages but with large families.

Nigeria is a rich country by the measurement on the current oil production sold in the international market for the past twenty-five years or so, yet majority of Nigerians are poor. It is estimated that 55.8 million Nigerians are very poor and live below the universal poverty line of 1 US dollar a day. It indicates that these poor people are found mainly in rural areas. The youths of this country constitute the majority living in these rural communities. Because, they are poor and cannot feed adequately, provide for themselves good shelter and health facilities, the future for them is punctured. This ugly condition thus give birth to prostitution, armed robbery, drug taking, it is also from this group that Nigerian bourgeoisies politicians recruit and armed as political thugs and aids during elections – and by extension increases the social problems in our communities. Poverty and hunger daily arrest youths of this country's capacity to think straight and right arising from poor governance (Omoragan and Okeke, 2010; Kogbara, 2010).

Youths and Unemployment

Unemployment is common everywhere both in developing and developed states. The significant thing or question to be asked is the rate between them. It is difficult to say the number of unemployed Nigerians. Unfortunately, neither the Manpower Board nor Ministry of Labour nor Federal Office of Statistics have accurate data of the unemployment rate in Nigeria. However, about seven years ago, the Federal Office of Statistics claimed that the national unemployment figure was 3.6 percent outside those who have not registered with Labour Exchanges. Comparatively in developed economies such as USA, Canada, Britain, it is only one digit raging between 0.4 and 1 percent. Today the number is much higher since Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Allied Institutions are turning out graduates in thousands into already saturated labour market. The other pool in the rural areas who did not attend higher school are part of the system. Recently, Chief Kola Jamodu, the President of Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), estimates that in 2009 alone, 834 businesses, mostly small and medium enterprises, closed shops due to hostile and uncompetitive operational environment, with an

estimated 83,400 redundancies. One can imagine the figure today (Manuaka, 2010; Kogbara, 2010; Oshiomode, 2011).

Besides unemployment, many Nigerians are underemployed, or better still exploited because they lack an alternative for a basic living. It is not uncommon to see even Master's Degree Holders earning ten thousand naira a month against the real salary. It is also not uncommon to see Nigeria University graduates becoming bus conductors – all because of frustration and perhaps maintaining family names. Some, too, are Okada drivers. It is because of these odd jobs engaged by this group of Nigerians that Gbenro Adesina and Femi Ayodele of the News Magazine described them as “The Wasted Generation” (Adesina and Ayodele, 2011). It is also from this group that the dubious politicians usually recruit to do their bid during elections and promised juicy rewards.

Godfatherism and Youth Political Violence

Godfatherism is the “States man” that was or still an influential politician who command respect in public because of material possession, wealth or charisma. It is seen as king makers in most cases and all politicians within his area of influence become loyal to him, (Abia, 2008). Often times these Godfathers appear to be untouchables in the political chessboard. Indeed, whenever he sponsors a candidate for an election, it is expected that his candidate must win whether such candidate is accepted by the people or not. In such circumstance, they would do anything to make sure the godfather's representative wins. Their actions would range from arming his boys, snatching of ballot boxes, and where there is opposition to their actions may result in killing, maiming of oppositions. It is from these actions that oppositions thrive and unnecessary elements take the centre stage.

Naked Injustice

Often times, political violence caused by youths usually occur as a result of injustice either through independent Electoral Commission or her agents in the discharge of their functions. The last presidential election in May 2011 was marred with irregularities such that those who were at the polling units, returning officers know where the victory pendulum swung – at the end the expected winner became the loser. That explained the political palavers that occur in Bauchi, Gombe, Kaduna and some other parts of northern Nigeria – where many corps members lost their lives. The players at the polling stations were youths, the returning officers at the centres were youths and a lot of voters were equally youths. It is common knowledge that since independence, the right candidates are usually being robbed of positions. June 12, 1993 presidential election is still very fresh in the minds of political gladiators and their followers (Nsima, 2012).

Education and the Nigerian Youths

Education is the power for development. It liberates the mind. It is a tool that prepares manpower to meet the requirement for modern world in areas such as health, agriculture, security, technology, etc. Research indicates that about 45 percent of Nigerians do not have access to basic education, and out of this, youths are the most affected. The ratio of persons acquiring education has nothing to do with population. The percentage of people accessing education is an indication that when people are educated, it is plus because they would know the value to themselves – care for themselves and the environment which they live. They would also contribute positively to economy thereby stimulating development. This means that education is the most potent instrument for alleviating and eventually abolishing poverty. Indeed, Nigeria education system is in shambles – educational policies are somersaults (today 6 years primary and 5 years secondary; the next 6.6.4.4 system and the next moment something else).

However, within the sector, many youths do not have access to tertiary education. Nigeria parades about ninety-five Universities (private inclusive) and well over thirty polytechnics, over forty Colleges of Education, and, in addition institutes and allied institutions, yet many cannot secure a place to study. Some youths have attempted Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) for more than three times without success. It is from this frustrating group that fall easy prey and become willing tools in the hands of dubious politicians and drug ‘masters’ or peddlers. The state of education is very poor in Nigeria (Akintunde, 2009; Osuagwu, 2011; Ekpo, 2011).

Youths and Perception of Politics

It is agreed by many that very many youths do not understand the meaning of politics. But that the simple language they tend to understand and respect is the language of political master who armed them to kill, maim when the political pendulum swing against them; meaning that when they fail to achieve their aim either during electioneering campaign or voting periods, they alter the course of peace through violence. Politics is all about service throw taking of power through normal political norms and ethnics (Emem, 2012; Mfoniso, 2012; Nsima, A., 2012).

Youth and Inordinate Ambitions for Public Office

Many youths take to violence to be accorded a position after the party had won. This they do because they are armed by political fathers who promised them one juicy office or the other. For instance, in Akwa Ibom State in May 2011 elections especially during the campaign and subsequent election into the office of the governor, many youths went wild – killing, maiming opposition members – for office holding. Today many in that group are either personal assistants, members of boards

and parastatals. This it is known does not occur well for development. Indeed, if you do not belong to the group (cult) forget achieving or belonging to the ruling class (Emem and Nisma, 2012).

Closely related to the above is the issue of the “winners take all” syndrome, hence when youths mostly who do not shared in the ‘cake’, at the slightest provocation in the political field violence thus ensued. This is very common during electioneering campaign or swearing of public office holders.

The Way Forward

The future of any country rests squarely on the shoulders of her youths. The youths are the foundation of the society – that depends on the viability of these youths. Viability of the youths are products of intellect, psyche, economic, social, etc. For Nigerian youths to become an asset for this country, educational policies must change, when one is educated, he would place value for his life. When he leaves nothing and understands nothing the political terrain would be violence always. Acquisition of quality and compulsory education would guarantee them a bright future. Politics must be played according rule and best practices as obtained in other parts of the world. Meaning that Nigeria politicians should learn to accept and defeat where necessary – in short entrench democracy and the rule of law.

Government at all levels should put economic mechanisms or structures for job creation. This is so because a hungry man is an angry man. Besides, most industries in our shores have closed shop, these showcase the insensitivity on the part of our leaders past and present. The youths need employment. It is believed that frustration is responsible for some youths being “stupid” errand boys for the unscrupulous politicians. They become pawns in order to eat, clothe and perhaps belong to the society that of course, already tensed.

Indeed, religious bodies or organisations should carry the youths along through moral lessons, discussions, seminars and conferences on the need to shun violence and live productive lives. But it is not uncommon today, because of race for materialism the society is impacting on those religious organisations – call it church or mosque.

Youths are expected to rise up and challenge negative practices entrenched in the Nigerian society in a bid to correcting them. That is not to be rather youths are involved in electoral frauds, corruption, insecurity among others in the process do they truly prepare to take over as future leaders?

Conclusion

So far, the paper has attempted to explain the causes of youth and political violence in the Nigeria project. Youths involvement in political violence are caused by the youth and poverty, hunger, unemployment, variant of interests, godfatherism, naked injustice, lack or poor education, youths perception or attitude to politics and perhaps the issue of the 'winner takes all' syndrome. Violence is impacting negatively on Nigerians. Property and lives are usually destroyed – this is anti-development. It does not allow foreign investors to show any interest in our nation. For internal investors it is becoming difficult especially as witnessed today in some parts of Northern Nigeria. Youth and political violence have destroyed the fabric in which our economy rests.

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