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Youth Involvement in Political Violence/Thuggery: A Counter Weight to Democratic Development in Africa

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Abstract

Modern Democracy is a welcomed political force which has redefined the existence of humanity. It has enabled the realization of socio economic development and egalitarian society in places where the concept had been properly utilized. In African continent, the concept is yet to fully make impact on socio economic and political system since its emergence in the aftermath of colonialism and military regimes which were wide spread before late 20th century. Among other things, democracy is still battling with political violence which derives its energy and dominance force from the army of young men and women of the African population. Using Anthropological, empirical documentations, and other available literatures, this paper unveils the negative relationship between youth involvement in political violence, and democratic development in Africa. In the quest for sustainable democratic development in the face of recurrence political violence among African nations, development of healthy political culture, participation in leadership positions, regular orientation/enlightenment, and detachment of politics from ethnic and religious affiliation; were recommended as panacea.

Keywords: Africa; Democracy; Democratic development; Political violence and Youth

Introduction

For the sustenance of human right in the society, consistent economic and social development, accountability and good governance in the modern society, democratic governance is an important factor. This is in view of the fact that democracy in its principles and utilitarian value grants equal opportunity, transparency and the value for human right and freedom. Though philosophical and ideological differences may justify any type of government anywhere in the world, the concept of democracy still prevail in the pursuit for egalitarian society; it is the governance which undermines dictatorial tendencies and engender group cohesion, group participation and group benefit in any given political setting [1]. However, the plausibility of democratic governance is a subject to certain factors such as the group differences, environmental factors, the level of civilization and enlightenment among different societies. In concept and principle, democratic governance provides the human society with the opportunities for advancement and every other thing that ensures human right and freedom in the society thus, if the concept and principles of democracy is adhered to, its fruits are indeed acceptable to every right thinking human being in the modern era. The abuse of the concept of democracy, which has become the order of the day among African nations, has made it irrelevant to the understanding of the youth and other members of the society. This has made democracy to be now synonymous with political violence, group (ethnic, tribe, class or party) domination, the germinating ground for corruption and the likes [1,2]. Of major interest here is the "democracy" in the African context becoming a germinating ground for youth violence and radicalization to the extent of making Thuggery and arms proliferation a regular business among the youth and the merchants of death. These situations are as a result of certain factors which have undermined the

essence of democracy in the interest of few who cleaved to power by chances and even others who ignore the rules of democracy in the blind support and pursuit of unjustifiable objectives [3]. The youth have become "sacrificial lambs" for the sustenance of the interests of the bloody political demagogues under the umbrella of "Democracy" in which in most cases, they are given the impression that they are fighting for their right. In whichever way or whatever justification for youth involvement in political violence especially, Thuggery, the ultimate truth is that such undermines democratic development and youth's chances of involvement in the main stream politics [4].

Meanwhile, this paper is focused to unravel the concept of democracy and the implication of youth involvement in political violence/Thuggery, to democratic development in Africa.

Africa

Geographically, we may simply see Africa as a chunk of the world map located in-between the Atlantic Ocean on the west and Indian Ocean on the East; Southern Ocean at the lower extreme and the Arabian Peninsula on the North East, and European continent on the North West. Beyond this categorization, Africa can be seen as a geographical setting which harbours the world hitherto largest black race. Also, in the principle on which the African Union (AU) is established, Africa is seen as a continent comprising the 53 nations officially recognized by the United Nations [5]. In whichever way it is defined, our major interest here is the understanding of Africa which captures the political history and landscape which by implication, pinpoint their location and extent of participation in the global concept of democratic governance.

The Menace of Political Violence/Thuggery in Africa

One of the most pressing questions challenging Africa is how to hold peaceful elections [6]. This is important because African elections

have frequently triggered conflict. At least 80% of Africa elections are associated with a serious violent incident that has resulted in loss of lives. Fierce competitions between rival leaders or political parties during elections has been implicated in outbreak of civil unrest in such places as Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Zanzibar, CAR, South Sudan etc. [7].

As the number of nations involved increases, so the number of life and properties lost increases. Political Thuggery and violence in African context/continent can manifest in different forms sometimes, making it more spurious to the search light bean of conflict experts. Though the issue of political violence is defined, based on the direct relationship between the violent act and the immediate political incidence, political violence has surfaced from certain unclear channels. In most African nations, certain violence which had claimed lives and properties have emanated from long time grievances over political situation in the country in question. In some places like CAR, Marley, Senegal, Somalia, Libya, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho and Egypt; political violence have surfaced under the smoke screen of ethnic rivalry, religious domination, quest for change of overdue government and assumed corrupt government [7]. These entire incidences were having political undertones. Of paramount importance here is that whether violence before, during or after election, the quick and available machinery (Thuggery) for the execution of these agenda, are the youth.

While elections (the attribute of the democracy) have generally been more peaceable mechanisms for contesting power, politically motivated violence have occurred in about 60% of African elections in 1990-2008 [8]. Electoral violence is orchestrated by political elites to intimidate voters. Youth wings or party task forces are prominent exponents. In Zimbabwe, victory for the opposition (MDC) in the 2008 parliamentary election triggered off immediate and brutal response from the ruling party (ZANU-PF). A campaign of beatings and targeted assassinations of MDC officials and supporters forced the party leader, Morgan Tsvangirai; to withdraw from the presidential run-off vote [9].

Elections can exacerbate existing tensions. A recurrence of factional clashes in Northern Nigeria followed Good Luck Jonathan's victory in 2011 presidential election. More than 800 people killed in the fighting. Perceived consolidation of power by politicians from the predominantly Christian south, and enduring economic disparity between Northern and southern states, fuelled the unrest clashes in Kenya's right valley following the 2007 elections reflected grievances among Kalenjin and Maasai over traditional lands allocated to Kikuyu in the 1970s by president Jomo Kenyata. According to empirical study across a verse African nations, willingness to use violence, and support for political violence were found to be prevalent among the youth. These were more surfaced in the countries with the history of political instabilities, ethnic and racial bigotries such as Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania, Sierra leone, Kenya, Liberia etc. Political violence is seen as one of the hallmark of African political landscape. More so, the youth involvement in such activities makes it more worrisome as, they are seen as leaders of tomorrow. No political violence has ever taken place in Africa without its facilitation on the ground by the youth. This appears in form of political Thuggery which had been seen as criminalization of politics [2]. The political demagogues in fermenting the trouble (political violence) tend to operate from behind the scene as commanders, for the youth to execute orders which are to their own detriment. Though in some cases political thugs are paid and operate

with relatively their consents, many youth are hoodwinked into political violence through the umbrella of ethnic membership, party membership and religious sentiments. By implication, a large chunk of youth involvement in political violence is attributable to ignorance as study have revealed that unemployment, corruption and bad governance contribute little in explaining youth involvement in political violence in long run [7].

Where there are educated youth in a political party, ethnic group or some religious groups, they become the unit of intelligence and operators of command post in order to execute violence for group interests. Where there are employed youth in some cases, they are compelled to provide for financial and other logistics for the execution of violence in the interest of their groups. Also, where the government is relatively doing well, the opposition members resort to twisting the minds of the youth against the party in power so as to champion their interests. All these and more reveal vulnerability of the youth to interest of some senseless politicians whose interest can only be achieved through violence.

Factors Engendering Political Violence/Thuggery in Africa

Indeed, the continued resurfacing of political violence and Thuggery are hinged on certain factors both within and from outside Africa. Among other things what makes youths vulnerable to the acceptance of Thuggery activities, include phenomenon of god fatherism in African politics, desperate attitude towards politics by the party leaders and members, money politics, foreign manipulation of political activities in Africa etc.

Group of gangs of all the political parties and in some cases ethnic groups seeking for political domination in Africa, is made up of thugs and thuggish who are disorganized drug addicts, aggressive, rough and dangerous youth who are either school dropouts, boys and girls from broken homes or societal outcast who are willing and able to cause trouble and spill blood [10]. By implication, youth who are socially downcast and from broken homes become the cheap articles for politicians who are looking for who to sing their own songs. This in furtherance now makes it possible for political violence to continue as long as such categories of youth continue to be available. Of course, where there are no youth who are willing to ferment trouble for the politicians, the reserved option will be bitterness expressed through the available media channels.

God fatherism though not absolutely in all parts of Africa, engenders political violence and encourage political Thuggery of which the youth are tools of realizing them. Historically, the phenomenon of god fatherism can be traced to orthodox churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. After baptism according to the doctrinal injunction after catechisms and other teaching processes, the new convert was expected to have a guarantor, appropriately referred to as the godfather. The godfather was expected to oversee, supervise and guide the actions of the convert now appropriately referred to as godson or the goddaughter [2]. In the context of most African politics, the godfather is the man or woman who has enormous goodwill and respect of the people, so much that his belief system represents those of his people. Godfathers maintain army of thugs who intimidate political opponents, snatch ballot boxes during elections and play other key roles in manipulation of election result in accordance with the wishes of the godfather. God fatherism as a factor in perpetuation of political violence manifest in the way they provide money for more youth to be

lured into violence during election in order to make sure their interests are secured. Of course their interest is to make sure the godsons or daughters win elections at all costs for their investment in politics to yield profits [11].

Another factor which reinforces violence and Thuggery in African politics is the desperate attitude towards politics among African politicians. The desperation among some African politicians to win elections and occupy political offices by all means is a major cause of prevalence of political Thuggery and violence in the body politics of the continent. In some cases, it is the incumbent leaders who want to remain in power by all means, maintaining the army of Thuggery both on the side of government security body and other illegitimate youth who may have been useful to them while contesting election earlier, and have been absolved as personal assistant and special body guards. In other cases, it is the contestants who are aspiring to come into political power, who maintain a large army of thugs that work in various capacities to actualize the purpose of the politicians. Whichever way, where two elephants are fighting, it is the grass that bears the grunt. It is simply the youth who are at the middle of these desperate fellows, being used against each other and even the innocent civilians during electioneering campaign [2]. The money politics which have become the order of the day across African nations cannot be left out in the explanation of the factors responsible for continued spread of political violence and Thuggery. The level of poverty in the continent is such intimidating that the most innocent youth may give it thought if circumstances brought the opportunity of participating in violence his way. The politician horde the wealth of the African nations only to release them during the electioneering campaign in form of gifts to the poor especially the rural dwellers so as to win their consent not only to vote, but to justify their thugs, who will be on the ground during election to carry the ballot boxes. Specifically, the youth are targeted as the instrument of perpetuating violence and, they are vulnerable to money and other gifts which can make them participate irrespective of the dangers involved in executing such mission.

It takes different forms in different parts of the continent to lure the youth into political violence either as hired thugs or mere party members. It may come as gifts to the youth wing of a political party or ethnic group from the desperate politicians; it may come in form of direct contract from the politicians to the group of youth who are capable of causing violence and using violence to execute certain missions. Also, in some cases, it may surface in form of indirect donation from a wealthy politician usually to the youth wing of the party or the ethnic group or even the mere youth wing of a local community. This now will become a motivating factor to them during election, to do anything possible in securing the interest of the donor. Cash or favours for votes constitute a more immediate and tangible reward than promises to deliver goods or reform policy. In Zambia, opposition leader Michael Sata resourcefully adopted "Don't Kubeba" – "Don't tell" – as his campaign slogan for the 2011 presidential election, encouraging people to accept gifts from politicians [9].

Youth Involvement in Political Thuggery/Violence as a Threat to Democratic Development in Africa

For any phenomenon to continue in existence and advancement there must be a favorable environment for it. This favorable environment is created by human beings and the categories of human beings involved. The survival of democracy in Africa is largely dependent on the youth and their future within the system. Though the present leaders claimed to be championing the interest of democracy

and egalitarian society, the evidences on ground clearly indicate otherwise. In a continent where the economic situation and political atmosphere have not favored the youth, it is hard to fathom the possibility of democratic development and youth development. Even though there are enormous natural and human resources available in the continent, the rate of economic growth and development in the face of global development index is not encouraging [12]. Inequality is rising and poverty level remains stubbornly high. In Sierra Leone, while GDP growth averaged 5% a year in 2007-2011, the purchasing power of low income earners halved [13]. No government in sub Saharan Africa has yet created the conditions for sustainable and transformative agricultural or industrial development. The failure of elected government to address deepening frustrations and hardships has fuelled popular discontent, from Swaziland to Senegal. In Malawi, many people lost their lives during protests at chronic fuel shortages, rising prices and high level of unemployment in July 2011. Uganda's "walk to work" protests orchestrated by opposition leader Kizza Besigye in response to a 50% surge in fuel prices between January and April 2011, were violently suppressed by the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). Nationwide strike brought the Nigerian economy to stand still in January 2012 after the government removed subsidies and the price of fuel doubled.

Almost three quarters (3/4) of African's population are under the age of 30. With minimal education, skills or opportunities for employment, the young are acutely disadvantaged [14]. The relegation of the youth at the background and subsequent exploitation of their situation continued to be wide spread, owning to the fact that this favours especially, the incumbent leaders who utilizes such opportunities to buy the youth into unwholesome activities. Out of deep frustrations and poverty the youth in their large number become vulnerable to the whelms and caprices of the political demagogues, who resort to violence and other unjustifiable means to actualizing their objectives. In the long run, the assumed leaders and hope of tomorrow become the hindrances to the positive future prospect of democracy. Indeed, youth involvement in political violence is a threat and virus to democracy and democratic development including, the prospect of youth development.

The principles of democracy demonstrate for a peaceful atmosphere and moreover, the inclusion of younger generation for its reinforcement. However, in the African context such is not the case as the sure and shortest way to ascend to power is by threat of violence by the incumbent leaders and other aspirants. More so, more than 70% of the leaders in various political positions are the aged who have been recycling themselves within the system from the military regime to the "democratic" era [15]. It is difficult to fathom how democracy will survive in the present situation in the African continent where, youth are given the position of thugs while the aged dominate the political sphere. This is due to the fact that while the political violence (sustained by the youth) will continue to militarize and criminalize politics, they continued domination of political sphere by the aged will be reinforcing authoritarianism under the umbrella of democracy. Of course, this can be observed in the present situation in the continent that, it is only in significant percentage of elections since 1960 till date have been relatively free and fair and also, the large chunk of the leaders are aged men and women compared to the situations in Europe and American [16].

The youth involvement in political violence becomes a counterweight to democratic development as it continues to undermine the essence of democracy in the African continent. This

continue to reinforce and sustain the dominance of the aged in the political sphere as the youth take the position of mafias and mechanism for the execution of the inordinate ambitions of the in articulate old men in the system. It also, continues to create tense and terror in the political atmosphere of the continent there by discouraging women and other legitimate electorates from participating in political activities. The chronic nature of political violence and the misconception of democracy lie on the youth involvement in political violence. This is because; the government security agents may not be absolutely useful in one's interest, without the indigenes who knows the nooks and crannies of the geographic setting [17]. In most African nations where political violence are taking place, it is the youth that take the lead while the security agents acts as undercover or in most cases, turn blind eye to it as far as it is in the interest of their masters. No political leader had ever succeeded in any election in Africa, without youth support in one way or the other and no political leader can go to the field and execute political violence. It is only the youth that are handy in perpetuating such act in most cases, in collaboration with the security agents.

Looking at the recent development in some African nations such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Marley, Somalia (in extreme cases); and Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Kenya, Central African Republic etc., we can understand the power of youth and its impact on the political system. Though there were aggregate of people constituting women, children, youth and elderly, the fact remain that, it was only the youth that carried the courage that sustained the movement and the subsequent impact [18]. In essence, political violence is a threat and frustration to democratic development while, youth are the only energy for the implementation and execution of political violence. Any move to champion for the solidification and sustenance of democracy in African continent must first consider the unhooking of youth from every mechanism of political violence, to focus them towards appreciating political diplomacy and meaningful dialogue in resolving political problems.

Conclusion

Democracy is the harbinger of socio economic and other aspects of human development. Of paramount interest are the regeneration of the society and the facilitation of egalitarian society. However, as every other phenomenon is faced with counter-actions, so democracy faces especially in African continent as the hub of developing and to underdeveloped nations.

In view of the evidences from historic and empirical data so far, and other scholarly arguments regarding youth involvement in political violence and the fate of democracy in Africa, the following recommendations were made: The three major social institutions (educational, family and Religious Institutions) should be utilized in ensuring healthy political culture among the African youth via political socialization; Youth participation in leadership positions should be encouraged; Politics in Africa should be neutralized from ethnic, religious and party affiliation, and focused towards individual rights to vote and to be voted for; Regular orientation and enlightenment of the youth on organizations should be encouraged in African nations at all levels.

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