YOUTHS AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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In this 3-part serial essay, Mwalimu George Ngwane examines the history of Youth leadership in Africa, typologies of emancipatory movements by youths and avenues towards the realization of an authentic democratic trajectory in Africa.

Part : A Biographic Data of Youth Governance

Preamble

Language experts, psychologists and political observers would want to give the word ‘youth’ an elastic definition of. ‘Youth is a state of mind’. It is indeed such a blanket definition that has motivated political Methuselahs to stay in power in Africa even after their political menopause.

For the sake of this essay’ I am restricting the word ‘Youth’ to the children of the post-independence era, the children born out of the holy divorce between colonialism and the search for the African personality, the children who never heard the raging sounds of the two world wars and who are hell bent to see today the fulfillments of yesterday’s promises. These are people on whom the future of this continent depends but to whom the future of this continent is seldom given.

As for the word ‘Democracy’, there are no two definitions. It is a process that aims at setting up structures to guarantee and safeguard the freedom to protest and the possibility to choose. It may have a cultural nuance but it has a universal language-the universal language is that it needs freedom of the press, opinion, speech, freedom of Association and the respect of human rights. The cultural nuance stems from the fact that while the West may have structures that can fully guarantee democracy; the African continent has always been misconstrued as being without structures or models that permitted protest and choice. So African rulers have either been coerced or cajoled to borrowing alien models that are neither respected nor adapted to local realities. The truth of course is that pre-colonial

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Africa had always fostered democracy and even some tight-knit societies still have Afrocentric models of democracy. This first part of the essay employs theoretical concepts of democracy, and the opportunities and obstacles that the youth of yore faced in engaging their establishments into broadening the democratic space.

**Early Youth Movements**

The early youth movements in the 1930’s were imbued with a sense of patriotism and solidarity. The fire to free their people from oppression urged them to create youth civil society organizations as well as student’s unions in which they militated and articulated the interest of Africans in bondage. An association like West African Students Union (WASU) was an important pressure group in the agitation against colonial rule, and as the training ground in militant nationalist politics for African Youths studying in Britain. Another one, the National Congress of Britain West Africa attracted young students from many parts of West Africa. It demanded among many things, the establishment of a West African University and a compulsory free education system and equal employment and promotion opportunities for both Europeans and Africans in the civil service. There was the Nigerian Youth movement that tried to unite Nigerians, through ethnic co-operation, to educate the public in political consciousness, and to achieve complete autonomy for Nigeria. The Gold Coast (Ghana) Youth Conference and the Sierra Leone Youth League both created a forum through which youths could meet and discuss national problems.

Around the same period in Cameroon, the Bakweri Cultural Organisation led by G.J Mbene, changed to the Cameroon Welfare Union with aims to awaken Southern Cameroonians to their political rights, serve as the mouth piece of the people as well as provide political education to the people. The demise of the Cameroonian Welfare Union gave birth to the Cameroon Youth League led by P.M Kale and Dr. E.M.L Endeley. The Cameroon Youth League aimed at uplifting the status of young people as players not pawns politically, socially, economically and educationally. It aimed at preserving and promoting the uniqueness of ethnic traditions of all Southern Cameroonian Peoples. The emergence of these youth organizations was a reaction to the conservatism of older associations and politicians. Because these youth organizations wanted to involve many more people in their activities than had the older Associations they quickly metamorphosed into trade unions and political parties in Africa. For this reason, Chief Obefemi Awolowo founded the Action Group in Nigeria when he was forty-two. Kwame Nkrumah formed the Convention People’s Party in Ghana when he was only thirty-eight. In Cameroon, Dr
Foncha founded the Kamerun National Democratic Party when he was thirty-nine and Dr Endeley created the Kamerun National Congress when he was only thirty-six. The buoyant flame of nationalism and the willingness of these young leaders to take Africa out of the yoke of colonialism led most of them to the fifth Pan African Congress convened in England in 1945. The young Africans at the congress were a collection of unknowns soon to win fame and political power in their different countries. The congress gave an impetus to the effort that was made to achieve the goal of national independence. It served as a pace maker of decolonization in Africa. Through these trade unions and political parties, the masses found a rallying point to crystallise their indigenous democratic visions and formulate an autonomous nationalist development ideology.

The next milestone in the history of Pan Africanism was the 1958 All African People’s Conference held in Accra, Ghana. The conference was attended by delegates from political parties, trade unions, women and especially youth organizations from twenty eight African countries. Six years later, on 25th May 1963, this conference gave birth to the Organization of Africa Unity, O.A.U, with thirty-two Independent African countries in attendance and the young leaders of the young organizations now becoming Heads of States.

Through vocal protests, organizations of young people with common interest and the quest for the dignity of the African man, the youths took the mantle of leadership. These youths constitute the first generation of African leaders-those who took power at about the time the second generation of African leaders were born. The dream of the first generation of leaders was to break away from colonialism and restore a sense of pride to their country, people and continent. It is from there that the second generation had to take the baton far afield. But what has gone wrong with the communication flow and leadership relay between the old and the young?

Firstly the answer goes back to the Independent days-the days when the first generation of African youths crossed the bridge of democracy and burnt it behind them. They plugged all holes of protest and choice. Their obsession for National Unity meant prevention of dissenting voices and opinions. They invented buzz words like ‘National Interest’, ‘Peace’, and ‘National Integration’ as a smoke screen to subvert the people’s political consciousness. Laws, like the 1962 law of subversion in Cameroon and the Preventive Detention Act in Ghana were enacted to prevent the freedom to protest and the possibility to choose in most African countries.

Secondly, the new leaders saw themselves as divine messiahs who had taken the African people across the Red Sea of oppression and were leading them to the Promised
Land of opportunities. They now saw themselves as demi-gods substituting themselves for the state and cladding themselves in robes like ‘Father of the Nation’, Apostle of Peace’, and ‘President for life’. Any criticism against the nation was misconstrued as a criticism against the leader. Then the one party state which in the traditional African societies lent avenues for dissent transformed itself into propaganda machinery for their benevolent despotic reforms. With the West supporting such a structure that could amply enable them monitor the communists and the capitalists, the one party system became blocked. The National Army, the Treasury, the Mass Media and the Nation’s constitution became the property of a single man-‘Père de la nation ’. This forced the African masses into despair and the new generation of an emergent young leadership became silent conformists to a situation that preferred to paper every crack on the wall and eliminate every ‘enemy’ in the horizon; all in connivance with colonial masters who had been sent off not sent away.

Some of the young intellectuals who wanted true independence and equal opportunities for their people, the young Africans who stood to protest against the misery of their people were either forced into self exile, jailed in underground prisons or killed in cold blood. Remember the vocal intellectual, Tom Mboya of Kenya, the incarnate of the African revolution, who was assassinated at the age of thirty nine in the streets of Nairobi on July 5, 1969. Remember the fire brand states man Patrice Emery Lumumba who represented the will and aspirations of the Congolese People but who was gruesomely butchered on January 17, 1961 at the age of thirty-six. Remember Ngugi wa Thiongo of Kenya, Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Jack Mapanje of Malawi, Mongo Beti of Cameroon whose literary works for democracy were met with verbal threats of death.

Remember Dele Giwa killed through a letter bomb on Sunday 19 October, 1986 in Nigeria at the age of thirty-six. His journalistic prowess towards democracy was a threat to the survival of the militarily junta.

In the new Independent Africa, democracy was a mere hobby and dictatorship a full time profession. The party had become a tool in the hands of the government not in the hands of the people.

When it became clear that the youths could not be listened to in the one party system and could not express themselves freely outside the party; when they found out that the structures of democracy were insulated to opposing views; they now chose the road of the Army.
Part II: The Balance Sheet of the Young Military Turks & Opportunities Inherent in the Second Wave of Democratization in Africa

One of the earliest military coup d’etats in Independent Africa took place in January 15, 1966 by the young Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu of Nigeria. A month later on February 23 1966 young Lt. General Joseph Ankrah overthrew Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. In 1969, Colonel Muammar Gadaffi overthrew King Idris in a bloodless army coup. Gadaffi was only twenty-six years old then. From then on the pendulum of African Leadership swung from the rattling of starched khaki attire to the danglin of flamboyant Western suits. There was a ping pong battle between the competing forces of the bullet used to silence dictatorship and corruption of civilian regimes and the compelling forces used to summon democracy and co-operation from military power. The traditional role of the military as guardians of the sovereign state gave way to a new role as custodians of political change. From the military school to political power, graduated thirty-four year old maverick Captain Thomas Isidore Noel Sankara of Burkina Faso, the enigmatic Captain Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana who became president at thirty-five, the innovative Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda who came to power at the age of forty-two, Lt. Colony Tedora Obiang Ngeuma of Equatorial Guinea who overthrew his blood-thirsty uncle Marcias Ngeuma on October 11, 1979 and became president at the age of thirty-seven.

The lack of respect of a democratic model has galvanized this military machinery to churning more political recruits like the twenty-nine year old Captain Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia, the thirty-something year old Captain Valentine Strasser, the twenty-nine year old Julius Maada Bio and the thirty-three year old Johnny Paul Koroma who all respectively became war lords and coup d’etat rulers in Sierra Leone in the 90s. The aim of these young Army Turks getting to power is quite often to set the democratic rules straight and to instill discipline in civilian chaos. Jerry Rawlings first seized power on June 4, 1979. He created a transition regime that favoured political party formation and subsequently fresh elections for a return to civilian rule. He then withdrew to the barracks. A civilian, Dr. Hilla Limann, won the elections but corruption re-emerged, and political instability gained place. Rawlings then struck back on December 31, 1981.

Yoweri Kaguta Museveni’s reign in Uganda has been described as the most peaceful and one in which elections have been freest. Sometimes when civilian leaders are not prepared to establish and respect sane democratic norms, the intervention of these young military chaps becomes inevitable. Skeptical of a restoration of genuine democracy, the young
soldiers cling to power producing real democratic reforms on the one hand and the in the extreme instituting a vampire regime.  
In the 1980s the harmattan of change and the people’s revolution started sweeping across the African desert where democracy was a mere bluff. The rise of people power or nationalism and the exigencies of Western countries to dangle the carrot of Aid only to African countries that were opening up to multiparty politics forced African leaders to reluctantly institute structures that could guarantee the freedom to protest and the possibility to choose. By 1990 multiparty politics had taken root in most African countries with hundreds of authentic and synthetic parties mushrooming in every constituency. Freedoms of Associations, Press and Opinion became entrenched as a constitutional right; constitutional reviews became fashionable with newcomers jostling for clauses that safeguarded alternation. More than a decade after this formal reintroduction of multipartysm one wonders why young people still remain on the margins of decision-making. The democratic structures today, no matter how rudimentary still provide adequate spaces for political engagement and strategic alliance with the youth but the youth are bound to take the initiative not by burning our institutions but by building a collegial leadership. The youth are obliged to be equipped with the kind of education that emphasizes the virtues of tolerance and intelligent political choices. They need to embrace the history and value system of the African continent as means to imbibing the qualities of people-centred governance. Young people constitute the nursery and laboratory of Africa’s democracy. Wherever they find themselves they should remember that this world was not given to them by their parents but loaned to them by posterity. In this era of multiparty elections, a voting right is both sacred and sacrosanct. It is a right black South Africans and African Americans fought to have. It is a right young people cannot afford to throw away. But for this voting right to have any added value it must be used as a protest weapon against bad governance and a patriotic weapon for party programs that spell out a new vision of human development. In this era with so many suitors fighting for the souls of the youth through elections the young people should not be driven by the corrupt wooing of mercenary politicians nor should they be attracted by the rabble rousing messages of born again democrats. No! the youth must be led by the search for politicians that tailor indigenous solutions to local problems. Young people must insist on being drivers not pedestrians in the highway of democracy. Most political parties create youth wings more as a decorative apparatus than as a functional institution. Youth wings have become sterile rubber stamps
conspicuous only during party rallies, youth days and meetings whose outcome is basically one of massaging the egos of the adult militants. What the youth should today be looking for is an independence of vision. Innovative visions that are rooted in the economic and social upliftment of the people. Africa is wary of the senile political lullaby which is not in harmony with progress. According to A. M Babu “political instability in Africa is partly a result of the frustration and impatience of the emerging younger generation, which sees the older generation as having messed up their lives and left them with nothing but a bleak future of unbearable external debt burden and mangled economics”. Young people must look for avenues to dream their own dreams even at the peril of being stigmatized as radicals and mad rebels for indeed there is some madness in every revolution. If political parties continue to treat young people as appendages of a decadent alliance of patronage then the youth may be forced to reclaim their voices in spaces that range from street parliaments, rag-tag rebellions and civil society platforms.

Street parliaments or what is commonly called demonstrations or protest are a civil society option that permits young people to position themselves democratically and to articulate, protect and advance their collective interests. It is through young people’s protests that Black majority rule came to South Africa. The Sharpeville protest on March 21, 1960 left 60 young people dead. The Soweto uprising of June 16, 1976 saw 618 school children destroyed in their prime and among them a certain thirteen-year old school boy named Hector Peterson. The rise of Jerry Rawlings to the Presidency in the 70s was heralded by the street voices of student groups and pro-socialist student leaders. In 1990 six young people laid their lives down for liberty sake after they were gunned down as martyrs of a democratic transition in the town of Bamenda in Cameroon. The present power play and jockeying that has led to a protracted crisis in Cote d’Ivoire oscillates between the youthful rebel called Guillaume Soro and the Young Patriots even if both camps are serving other overt and covert agendas. University protests in Cameroon in the 2000s have been linked to the search for socio-educational reforms and geo-political balance. Guinea’s 2007 New Year gift was 60 slain youth who sacrificed their lives on the altar of democracy. Rebel incursions still play a central role in political gerrymandering in Chad, Central African Republic, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Yesterday it was Liberia, Sierra Leone and Algeria. With the recruitment of young people in the ranks of this rebel groups gaining currency there may not be any end in sight of the
youth actively taking part in options outside party choices. And this is where the option of Independent candidacy is acting as a saving grace to young people who are opting out of party militancy. This option has been tried and tested with generous success in most parts of Africa. It is an option that provides the youth with the opportunity of bringing a new vision and fresh agenda to the body-politic of our newfound democracy. Indeed the independent candidate option is now regarded as an antidote to gerontocratic politics and a rite of passage to generational democracy.

**Part III: The Challenges Ahead & the Need for a New Democratic Ethos and Pan African Discourse**

What I propose for young people who wish to overhaul their obsolete and fossilized democratic machinery is to come back to the strategies of our pioneer pan Africanists whose binary motto was “Think African, Implement National: If they must have an independent vision of their future then the ranks of civil society associations, mainstream party politics and trade unions would be their entry points into political development. They would have to be part of a real broad-based organization with ripples into a strategic continental network. As much as insular parochial village associations and students’ unions have a direct impact on the social responsibility and development agendas of a micro-society, they are by their limitations mere vistas of a wider democratic space. Today’s youth would hardly find solutions to the national question and the retarded economic and political unification of Africa if they continue to seek “paradise” across the Atlantic or dissipate vital energy in orgies of social masturbation. In an earlier book chapter titled “African Youth must arise” (in my book *Way Forward for Africa*), I categorized the African youth into three generations. The complacent generation that comprises youth who see ills in their society but prefer to play the ostrich. Motivated by the urge to survive, and triggered by the predatory quest for material satisfaction the youth become appendages to the status quo more out of convenience than conviction. Faced with the inadequacies of state functioning, this generation recoils to their empty ethnic shells not to sing the redemptive songs of a national symphony but to propagate the confrontational dirges of a national suicide. This generation should not be mistaken for being dull and ignorant. On the contrary some of the finest scholars in the continent have been the spokespersons and apologists of this ideological bent. The greatest peril that therefore lies ahead of Africa is that the continent
shall continue to wallow in a self-inflicted economic underdevelopment if the ranks of this generation continue to swell unabated.

Yet a worse generation is what I call the wasted generation. In contrast to the complacent generation this class has completely given up on its country’s soul and on Africa’s future. It sees Africa’s salvation in the illicit and paternalistic patronage the West holds on the African people. Dazzled by the mirage of Western civilization and strapped by the bonds of colonial servitude, this generation has acquired a dangerous consumption pattern that is incompatible and inimical to its productive capacity. The generation has become an assorted group of parrots seeing nothing about the Japanese and Chinese philosophy that every civilization is informed by its past no matter how rudimentary. Castrated by “Western cultural overkill and invaded by the psychosis of self-denial, this class has dumped hyper Westernism and Eurocentric garbage” on their development and democratic roadmaps that has turned slavery into a Sunday picnic. Their conclusion is that nothing works in this continent and the return of the colonial regimes is the answer.

In spite of harassment, political victimization and even death threats, there is yet another generation that has refused to be cowed or dragooned into submission. This generation continues to raise its apocalyptic voice above the din that the above two generations have created. Even within the mainstream party politics this generation questions the rationality of political absolutism that has been gaining currency in Africa. It questions the fault lines in election manipulation, constitution tinkering and recycled governing. At a time when both the ruling and opposing parties in Africa’s fragile democracy are bereft of new ideas, this generation empowers itself like the youth of Botswana to engage the establishment. On 2nd February 1995 the Youth wing of the Botswana Democratic Party asked for the resignation of the then President Quette Masire on the grounds that “his government had become insensitive to public opinion, the party needed reform and the country needed a new and fresher vision” Indeed members of this generation have not only persistently warned of the greater holocaust for Africa if the path of people-first-politics is not pursued but have proposed credible alternatives for indigenous democracy and homegrown development that can usher our countries and continent into their legitimate historical nomenclature. Rather than join the present petty bourgeoisie leadership in pandering to the ethos of neo-liberal fundamentalism and the IMF/World Bank mantra of Structural Adjustment Programme, this generation continues to formulate political and economic visions that are underpinned by a nativist-inspired paradigm of localization and endogenisation. Yet this generation is being snubbed and labelled as radicals and rebels.

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and in its place a bunch of stooges and doormat politicians enjoy limelight attraction. Any government that survives through domesticating and de-legitimizing independent critical thinking is inadvertently sowing dangerous seeds of its own destruction. Even with the reintroduction of multiparty-politics most African political parties still maintain a highhanded policy of political control and exclusion. The result of this one-party-state mentality in most cases is that while Asian countries and India have graduated from nominal Independent states to vibrant industrialized regions, some African countries are plummeting from banana republics to coconut empires. And we all know that the strength of the success of Asia and India lies on their reliance on human resources (political inclusion) it lies on their reliance on historical dialectic (indigenous modernization), it lies on a collegial patriotism that begins from its leadership; it lies on the power of economic foresight (resource allocation) inherent in its policy of smooth transitions. But no matter how long they are ignored this generation that I call the critical generation cannot be avoided. When the dark complacent and wasted clouds would fade away the blue critical sky shall emerge and Africa shall rise and shine. But all is not doom and gloom for this continent because giant strides are recorded in Ghana, Botswana, Benin, Mali, Mauritania, Libya, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia. There are rays of hope in Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gambia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Angola, Sierra Leone paradoxically most of them, countries that are just recovering from the scourges of conflict. The relative success story of these countries may not be enough to counter the ubiquitous negative images that the Western media have of Africa, but they represent potential pivotal and development lodestars whose networking can leapfrog Africa’s political and economic unity. There is also the wind blowing from South America; the wind of small courageous countries like Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia and Nicaragua with their populist and charismatic leadership forging programmatic and participatory forms of linkage between political parties and civil society and giving the South American continent a leverage into globalism as players not pawns. It is no coincidence that an Africa-South America summit held in Abuja, Nigeria, from 26 to 30 November 2006 with the conclusion that further consultations with the Presidents of Brazil and Venezuela, and a follow-up review meeting be held in Venezuela in March 2007 to consolidate the outcomes of the Abuja Summit. It is a no coincidence that an Africa-China Forum on Cooperation held from 3-5 November 2006 in Beijing ending with China’s pledge of US$5bn in aid to Africa by 2009. But whatever the case, Africa’s future having already failed by facing “Westwards” does not lie in facing “Southwards” or “Eastwards”; it now lies in facing “Inwards”. It lies in moving
from a consumer continent to a producer power. It lies first and foremost in self-reliance before “other-reliance”. It is therefore no coincidence again that the 8th Ordinary Session of the African Union summit held recently in Addis Ababa from 29th-30th January 2007 reiterated that the ultimate objective of the African Union is the political and economic integration of the continent leading to the creation of the United States of Africa; the African Union summit decided to devote the 9th Ordinary Session of the Assembly in Accra, Ghana from 1-3 July 2007 to the theme: “Grand Debate on the Union Government”;(a debate that Kwame Nkrumah championed for the African people since 1957); the summit further decided that all other agenda items shall, in principle, be transferred to the 10th Ordinary Session of the Assembly scheduled in January 2008 with the exception of the elections of the Members of the Commission. If these are signs that the African leadership is now coming to terms with the Kwame Nkrumah/Muammar Gaddafi reality then the youth must join their voices to this renewed search for an authentic Africanhood through an African citizenship. Not even the cynical South Africa whose utopian pretension to become a global leader is preventing her to lend formal support to the realisations of the United States of Africa project should deter young people. Not even the nonchalant diplomatic posture that the Cameroonian leadership has consummated with the African Union in recent years should frustrate the youth. Not even the calamities of disease, primitive-style wealth accumulation, immigration blues, unemployment woes, the Lansana Conte syndrome, and the unconstitutional elongation of Presidential tenures in office, should serve as push factors to resignation to fate. The darkest hour is at dawn. Never before have the cries of an unfulfilled democratic promise in Africa reached a crescendo. Never before have the challenges and the will of the youth to chart an alternative development trajectory, a new democratic dispensation and a people-centred Afrostroika been so imperative. Never before has the need for platforms (Youth pan African congress; African Youth Leadership forums; panAfrican Youth seminars, creation of pan African clubs like Club Kwame Nkrumah, Club Mandela, Club Anta Diop etc); that address youth pan African leadership and entrepreneurial skills in a new Africa been so urgent.

True, the process of reconstituting African regimes is a long one; true like S.Tjip Walker noted “the effects of colonial and patrimonial systems of order are hard to shake” but it is also true that a renascent generation of African leaders in the mould of youthful leaders like Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, Yayi Boni of Benin and Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali, now serve as templates for young people of Africa.

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Instead of being frustrated by the failures of a leviathan leadership, the youth should be inspired by the faith of such a luminary leadership whose partnership and pedestal it needs to make the United States of Africa the bastion of democratic development and the continent of human civilisation. I have spoken.

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