

## Africa'S Youthquake: Understanding the Impact of Young People on Politics and Leadership

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### Abstract

*The increasing demographic weight of Africa's youth population has positioned young people as pivotal actors in the continent's political and leadership transformations. This study critically examines the phenomenon described as Africa's "youthquake," exploring how young people are reshaping governance, political participation, and leadership dynamics across the continent. Given that more than 60 percent of the African population consists of youth younger than 25 years of age, it is a political fact that changes significantly ranging between grass-roots mobilization to renewal of leadership. A mixed-methods design incorporating secondary data analysis, case study comparisons and cross-national surveys is used to explore patterns of youth engagement with electoral politics, protest movements, online collective action and emergence into leadership roles. The findings reveal that young Africans are simultaneously agents of disruption and innovation in political systems that have historically marginalized them. According to the statistical evidence, the level of youth turnout does not seem to be equal in every country, with Kenya and South African having substantial levels of youth abstention, whereas Nigeria and Sudan have reported increased numbers of mobilization through protest and non-standard activism (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa). Online platforms (especially Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook), in particular, have emerged as essential to giving young people a voice, as was the case in Nigeria in the #EndSARS movement, in Sudan at the pro-democracy protests, and in South Africa at the #FeesMustFall protest. Nevertheless, structural obstacles--such as the unemployment of young people, economic insecurity, authoritarian suppression, and gerontocracy as political systems--remain a factor that has restricted the complete translation of the energy of young people to the formation of sustainable leadership patterns. The analysis underscores the paradox of Africa's youthquake: as youths remake the political discourse and show themselves capable of change leadership, institutional opposition very frequently works to cut their authority. However, comparative case studies show that the youth-based movements have greatly changed policy reforms, democratization prospects and leadership accountability in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sudan. The conclusion of this study is that the future political direction of Africa will be more shaped by the degree to which these youth energies can be channeled into the process of inclusive governance and development of leadership. The paper makes additional suggestions to scholarly and policy discourse because it links the demographic*

*dynamics to the political areas thereby providing a theoretical and practical value to the discussion of the transformational capacity of young Africans. According to it, the comprehension of youthquake involves not only taking into consideration the destabilization impact of the young individuals in politics but also putting investment in changing the institutions that prompt to constant involvement of the young in leadership. These results form a basis on which the governance structures, civic education and development of the intergenerational leadership are revisited and reconsidered in the modern African political system.*

**Keywords:** Youthquake, Africa, political participation, leadership, governance, digital activism, democratization.

## **Introduction**

The 21st century has witnessed what many scholars and commentators have termed a “youthquake”, a political and social transformation driven by the demographic weight, activism, and aspirations of young people. The phenomenon is more pronounced in Africa, or rather, the continent has the youngest population in the world. The United Nations (2022) provides data indicating that more than 60 per cent of the population in Africa consists of people younger than 25 years, with a median age of only 19.7 years, compared to 38 years in North America and 42.5 years in Europe. Such demographic fact underlines both the number of young people and the decisive role that the young generation in Africa can play in the sphere of governance, leadership, and democracy. They are slowly asserting their influence in election results, civil and political movements and are redefining political legitimacy on the continent. The significance of youth bulge in Africa is that it has a two-fold opportunity; youth bulge held in check by employment, education, and inclusion can be the source of demographic dividend, whereas failure to meet aspirations can be the cause of instability. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2021) estimates that 375 million young Africans will be within the labour force by 2030, with structural unemployment levels high and youth unemployment rates standing at more than 60 percent in certain countries. Such socioeconomic limitations have been transformed into the increased political awareness among young people who are increasingly mobilised to fight the existing modes of governance, which they find to be unresponsive, corrupt, and exclusionary (Resnick & Thurlow, 2015). Political awakening of the African youth, consequently, is a revolt against the structural failures as well as a positive move to take control of the future (*African Union, 2022; UNDP, 2023*)

This drift is suggested by recent electoral and civic patterns. This is witnessed in countries such as Nigeria where record numbers of youth were turned out by the 2023 presidential elections with over 70 percent of the new voters register under 35 years of age (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2023). The process of this upsurge was boosted by the momentum of the 2020 #EndSARS protests, during which young Nigerians pushed against the end of police violence or law enforcement abusing its power and the overall injustice of the system (Adesina, 2021). In Senegal, the movement of the youth in 2021 decisively opposed and changed the politics of

incumbency and national texts (Honwana, 2019). In various parts of Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan and South Africa, youths have driven demonstrations and online movements to galvanize political action but also bypass the orthodox party system providing alternative means of political mobilization. Such developments point to the revolutionary potential of the young generation in changing the political paths of Africa. The emergence of the digital technology has also increased the importance of the youthful Africans in politics and leadership control. Social media has been one of the most important platforms in political mobilization, protest, and accountability as more than 67 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to hold mobile subscriptions by 2025 (GSMA, 2020). Examples of transnational solidarity, state power, and government response to civic actions globally are tags that spread across national borders like #FeesMustFall in South Africa, #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe and #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). The fact that online platforms enable youth to overcome the long-established information gatekeepers opens new political arenas where the discourses of resistance, innovative changes, as well as reforms meet.

Meanwhile, there is a lot of contradiction between the youth and politics in Africa. Although the youth is the demographic majority, they are grossly underrepresented in official political leadership. The study conducted by Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018 has shown that just 2 per cent of the African parliamentarians are aged up to 30, whereas the average age of the African heads of state is 62 years (IPU, 2018). Such a mismatch between youth demographics and political leadership illuminates factors that constitute structural impediment to direct engagement of young people in governance including restrictive candidacy laws, prohibitive financial cost of holding positions in government, cultural gerontocracies among others. The youth influence is therefore usually expressed beyond the conventional political processes, in protest movements, civic organizations and cyber spaces. The causes and effects of the youthquake in Africa raise very grave and intricate consequences. Energy, innovation and resilience of the youth on the one hand presents opportunities to democratic renewal and accountability on the one hand and on progressive leadership. Conversely, the fact that they have been left out in the process of decision-making with economic marginalization poses a threat to promote disillusionment, radicalization, and instability. Like Abbink (2005) and Honwana (2012) contend, African youth can be described as a threat and a promise, a group of people who can be critiqued like the state and at the same time celebrated by the society. This duality is instrumental in the policies and in the research that has to be conducted with policy formulation as well as with the civil society actors because this is a central area where creating something positive that transforms positively and something bad that has an alienated aspect attached to it (*Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2020; Cheeseman & Larmer, 2022*).

## **Literature Review**

The study of youth participation in African politics and leadership has gained significant scholarly attention in recent decades, as demographic realities and political transformations highlight the growing influence of young people across the continent. The concept of a “youthquake”, a seismic

disruption driven by the agency of young populations, captures the essence of this shift. Existing literature situates African youth as both subjects and agents of political change, emphasising their role in democratic transitions, protest movements, and leadership struggles.

### **1. The Demographic Context: Africa's Youth Bulge**

One of the patterns that are repeated in the literature is the centrality of African youth being of a demographic character. It is stated that Africa is referred to as the youngest continent in the world being that the median age stands at 19.7 years as opposed to 30.4 years elsewhere (United Nations, 2022). The estimations assume that Africans will have one in three young populations in the world by 2050 (African Union, 2019). According to the critics like Resnick and Thurlow (2015), the fact that this demographic is referred to as a youth bulge implies that it can be a two-sided coin where it poses both potential benefit and threat to economic growth as well as democracy renewal and political unrest due to unmet needs. African Development Bank (AfDB, 2021) reveals that approximately 12 million young people in Africa land in the job market every year, with only 3 million of them finding proper employment. Political disillusionment and the following youth activism are directly related to prolonged unemployment and underemployment problems (Filmer & Fox, 2014).

### **2. Youth and Political Participation**

There exists a body of literature that points out this paradox regarding the political involvement of the youth in Africa. Youths are yet to be at the centre of political arena despite the fact that they form the majority population. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), throughout the world, only 2 percent of parliamentarians are under 30 years with Africa following suit on this global trend. According to Luescher-Mamashela, Kiiru, and Mattes (2011), youth are defined as demographic giants and political dwarf because of the structural impediments like restrictive candidacy laws, economic marginalization, and gerontocratic cultures (*EISA, 2021*).

However, the youths in Africa are also registered among the high users of the unconventional forms of political engagements. In electoral statistics, young voters usually constitute the majority of electorates: particularly, in Nigeria 2023 general elections, more than 70 percent of new registered voters were younger than 35 (Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023). Nevertheless, the collective responsibility to engage in the process by voting is often negotiated with the attitude of distrusting the validity of institutions, which is reflected in the youth realizing that the political elites are corrupt, self-serving and out of touch (Logan, 2015). This lack of trust gives rise to an affinity with informal activism, grass roots mobilization and protest politics.

### **3. Youth-Led Protests and Social Movements**

The literature consistently documents the centrality of youth in protest movements that have reshaped political trajectories across Africa. According to Honwana (2012), African youth can be viewed as makers and breakers: this is because they can resist faulty systems and re-imagine

national images. Some prominent examples are the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, #EndSARS in Nigeria, #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe, and the uprisings led by youth of Sudan overthrowing Omar al-Bashir in the year 2019 (Branch & Mampilly, 2015; De Waal, 2019).

The thinkers emphasize that such movements are moving beyond the generational sulks to define their demands that include wider structural changes about accountability, human rights, employment and equitable governance. Omilusi (2018) states that Nigerian #EndSARS protests demonstrate how decentralized, leaderless, and youth-led mobilization can present the drastic challenges to the established regimes. On the same note, the 2012 Yalla Marra movement based in Senegal and comprised largely of young rappers and activists has been widely cited as having helped affect election results and departmental encroachment of the regime (Gueye, 2013).

#### **4. Digital Activism and New Political Spaces**

One of the most transformative dimensions of youth political engagement is digital activism. Since mobile penetration rates have constantly increased above 46 percent in sub-Saharan Africa in 2021 and are anticipated to rise to 67 percent by 2025, social media networks have become a paramount instrument in political mobilization (GSMA, 2020). Research also highlights how digital activism allows youth to avoid being blocked by the mainstream gatekeepers of politics and to democratize information and transnational building of solidarities (Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018).

One can think of many, ranging from the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in Nigeria, which created worldwide attention on the kidnapping of the schoolgirls by the Boko Haram in 2014, to #EndSARS, which was able to mobilise millions of Nigerian youths into the streets as well as online. There are, however, limitations to social media activism. In a similar line of thought, Tufekci (2017) warns that the rise of digital platforms can be associated with a decrease in the barrier to participation and a concomitant increase in the rise of ephemeral movements with limited sustainability in institutions. Case studies in Africa demonstrate such strain, with governments more and more turning to internet blackouts, cyber policies, and online repression in order to stem online dissent (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018).

#### **5. The Representation Gap in Leadership**

While youth activism is robust, the literature underscores the persistent gap in youth representation in formal political leadership. The leadership organisations that are characterised by the dominance of elderly members are still intact, as the average age of African presidents is 62 (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). Other theorists like Abbink (2005) have asserted that the politics of Africa is still under gerontocracy, where age equates with power and legitimacy, thus relegating young leaders.

But early indications show that there are soft changes. The example of the Nigerian Not Too Young to Run Act (2018) that reduced minimum ages to stand in elective positions is an indicator of the institutional understanding of the necessity of inclusivity. However, it is claimed that the structural

obstacles, such as financing capacity and clientelism networks, still restrain in the practical influence of such developments (Okeke & Uzodike, 2020).

## **6. Youth as Agents of Transformation or Instability?**

Literature is contradictory about whether the youthquake in Africa is to be seen as a phenomenon of democratic rejuvenation or a factor of destabilization in the continent. According to the proponents of the demographic dividend thesis, when empowered, the youth can be used to ignite innovation, inclusive leadership, and grow an economy (Bloom, Canning, & Sevilla, 2003). On the other hand, the risks of alienation, radicalization, and violent extremism of the disenfranchised youth cohort were mentioned in pessimistic reports (Agbibo, 2013). The emergence of armed youth militistics, armed gangs and armed insurgencies in nations such as Nigeria, Somalia and Democratic Republic of Congo show how political and economic marginalization of the youth is capable of leading to violence (Abbink, 2005; Honwana, 2019).

## **7. Conceptualizing the Youthquake**

There are a variety of theoretical prisms that academicians use to analyze the youthquake in Africa. Generational theorists have focused on the disruptive role of the youth in breaking political continuity and structuralists have focused on economic marginalization as causing activism. Postcolonial theory highlights the conflict between conventional governance and the new ways of wanting authority to be positioned as an heir to the past as well as the people willing to subvert the historical power relations (Mbembe, 2017). Such convergence of the views shows that the youthquake in Africa cannot be distilled into a one-dimensional aspect, since it is complex interplay of demographics, technology, political culture, and socioeconomic constructs.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Youth and Political Agency**

Two main schools of thought dominate the discourse on youth political participation in Africa. The first frames youth as a destabilizing force, prone to violence, radicalization, and insurgencies (Urdal, 2012). The second emphasizes youth as democratic innovators, mobilizing through civic protests, social movements, and digital platforms to reshape governance (Iwilade, 2017). Recent scholarship suggests a hybrid understanding: youth are neither passive victims nor inherently disruptive but rational actors navigating structural inequalities and limited opportunities. This dialectical lens highlights the ambivalence of youth power in African politics. Both the challenges and promise of Africa's.

### **Comparative Case Study on Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Sudan**

#### **Overview and analytical frame**

Around the continent, a youthquake is transforming youth involvement in politics, conflicts, social mobilisation and leadership streams. Having a median age on the continental scale below 20 in 2020 and likely to be the youngest corner of the world in the next 30 years, demographic pressure

is clashing with digital mobilisation, the inability to achieve employment, and patchy reforms in institutions (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020; Institute for Security Studies, 2025). This comparative case study examines four pivotal contexts, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Sudan, through a common lens: (1) demographic leverage and socioeconomic conditions; (2) mobilization repertoires (online–offline linkages); (3) electoral and institutional openings; and (4) outcomes and constraints for youth influence over politics and leadership. It draws on official statistics, election observation, and human-rights documentation to triangulate trends.

## **Nigeria: a numerically dominant youth cohort confronting institutional inertia**

### **Demographic and socioeconomic context**

Young people make up a commanding population portion (more than 60 percent under 25 age) in Nigeria, which renders a huge electoral potential, however, there is prevalent underemployment and dividends break with the governance that propel anti-corruption declarations and rights-based assertions (CJID, 2023). The Nigerian electoral process is in the 2023 cycle, with 93.47 million voters registered in the 2023 election cycle by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); youths (1834) were disproportionately represented in the latter number; that is, nearly 7.28 million of 9.5 million (=76%) of the new voters were youths (Premium Times, 2023; INEC, 2024). And the figures are an echo of a generational effort to turn numbers into political confidence, although the turnout and validity issues tempered influence.

### **Mobilization and digital repertoires**

Post-#EndSARS (2020) youth activism had invested in organisation expertise which subsequently lent greater outsider credibility to the insurgent surge of the Labour Party in 2023 that rode networked fundraising, micro-influencer culture, and lightning-speed content generation (EU EOM, 2023; Wired, 2023). The social media scope of the campaign was incomparably high compared to competitors on the Internet through Tik Tok and Youtube which extended the agenda-setting of the campaign to the first-time voters in a measurable scale (EU EOM, 2023).

### **Institutional openings and constraints**

The 2018 constitutional amendment on the age to run as represented by Not Too Young To Run age was procedurally and symbolically an advantage since the minimum age to be elected to public office was reduced (Heinrich Bll Stiftung, 2022). However, descriptive representation is sparse: in the wake of change, the under-35s received approximately 6.6 percent of the elected mandates that indicated structural barriers in both the process of candidate selection by parties and campaign funds as well as patronage networks (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2022). In the meantime, commentators noted the logistical and transmission failures recorded in 2023 that dampened youthful enthusiasm in the formal processes (EU EOM, 2023; TIME, 2023).

### **Outcome**

Demographic mass given digital fluency illustrates how Nigeria has been able to alter the narratives and introduce competitiveness in which incumbent machinery is not defeated by the sheer force of numbers and the ability to use technology. One of the parts that can be touched upon in youth influence is in agenda-setting and candidate viability; however, to convert these gains into concrete results in terms of leadership, party reform, election integrity and continued pipeline development is inevitable.

## **Kenya: a digitally coordinated Gen-Z protest wave meeting coercive pushback and electoral ambivalence**

### **Demographic and electoral participation**

The Kenyan youth has a large voting population, which is underrepresented. Even though there were more than eight million 18 to 24-year-olds according to eligibility to vote in 2022 ( $\approx 28$  per cent of the total voter population), less than 2.3 million people in this age group eventually registered, which demonstrates that apathy and obstacles persist (Shujaaz Inc., 2022). With county-level gaps disguising a generation gap in registration, the IEBC had an overall registered voters figure of 22.12 million (IFES, 2022).

### **Mobilisation and repertoires: from ballot box to streets**

A leader-lite, meme-literate Gen Z movement featured the use of X/WhatsApp/TikTok to crowdsource legal assistance, blood donations, and logistics of protests against a controversial finance bill and known government failures it grew to reflecting broader demands of accountability in the face of governance failures, with the roots in tax grievances. Lethal repression was monitored by rights monitors: in July 1, 2024, KNCHR reported at least 39 fatalities, and 361 injuries were documented since then by Human Rights Watch, which recorded at least 31 killings during the May 2023 to July 2024 protests, and Amnesty International, reporting around 60 protester killings in June and July 2024 (KNCHR, 2024; HRW, 2024; Amnesty, In June 2025-July 2025, there were renewed protesters and this time, the death toll topped at least 16 people as reported by the Reuters and AP news, leading to increased volatility and coercive policing (Reuters, 2025; AP, 2025).

### **Institutional openings and constraints**

Although civic space has been increased by devolution and judicial activism, party candidacy by the youths is too expensive and clientelist. Movement leverage is evidenced by the withdrawal in 2024 of the finance bills, but the youth would die in leadership institutionalization, and registration and turnout gaps are an acute bottleneck (Shujaaz Inc., 2022; IFES, 2022). The securitized reaction of the state has a risk of increasing mistrust between generations.

### **Outcome**



Kenya shows just how powerful networked youth mobilization can be (and how flimsy): its victories on policy matters are fast and concrete, but its transition into representative politics is spotty and its members continue to face repression. Street power could not always produce a lasting institutional voice without structural change (police accountability, youth-centric rules of parties, and civic education).

## **South Africa: a numerically large youth bloc constrained by unemployment and turnout attrition yet pivotal in coalition-era politics**

### **Demographic and socioeconomic context**

Compared with its neighbors and counterparts on the continent, South Africa is not young, yet it is still young (median age 28; Stats SA, 2024/2025). Youth unemployment is one of the highest globally: 59.6% (15-24) and 39.4% (25-34) in Q4 2024, which points to severe labour-market scarring (Stats SA, 2024 QLFS). These socioeconomic headwinds demoralize political efficacy and, by radicalizing redistribution and service delivery claims, radicalize them too.

### **Mobilization and electoral behavior**

Historical examples like #FeesMustFall have remained youth activism that informs policy frames pertaining to inequality and access (Greeff, 2021). The IEC stated that 18-34 year olds filled an estimated 42% of the voters roll (approximately 11.7 million of 27.79 million) before the watershed 2024 election, a potential influence in a fragmentation and coalition moving system (University of Johannesburg CSDA, 2024). Research on the turnout in 2024 focuses on the competition and the influence of youth-appealing aspects and minority parties, given the waning advantage of traditional parties (Mbeti, 2024).

### **Institutional openings and constraints**

All of that is determined through intra-party democracy: whether to include the young candidates in proportional representation or party lists, or to relegate them. The rhetoric pursuing youth during coalition negotiations outweighs the cost of experience requirement and list placements (pipeline barriers) as descriptive returns. The participation struggles as people cannot afford to take part despite the large number of individuals who have registered in advance.

### **Outcome**

South Africa demonstrates a conundrum: young people represent a huge election reservoir of agenda-setting influence on inequality and education, but a lack of jobs and gatekeeping by the party system limit consistency in youth voter turnout and insurrection of youth leadership. The coalition period can open up new grounds of bargaining with the caucuses of youths in case parties institutionalise youth quotas and mentorship.

## **Sudan: revolutionary youth leadership stymied by militarisation, civic closures, and information blackouts**

### **Demographic and mobilisation context**

In April 2019, when Omar al-Bashir was overthrown as a result of nationwide protests, Sudanese youth were its the core (SWP, 2024; CMI, 2020). Their arsenal consisted of resistance committees in their neighbourhoods, women leaders and a code-based online organisation.

### **Civic closures and repression**

Following the massacre underlying the sit-in in Khartoum (June 2019) and the regular blocking of the internet, information controls were applied to divide the mobilisation (HRW, 2019; Freedom House, 2019; Internews, 2022). Further dents in civic space were caused by coups and warfare since 2023, which have since comprehensively disintegrated; the #KeepItOn coalition has claimed a rerun of internet shutdowns in 2024 (Access Now, 2024). Young people have been majorly left out in terms of having a bargain in the elite despite bearing the risks of mobilization (CMI, 2020).

### **Outcome**

As seen in Sudan, the capacity of the youth to transform can only take them as far as violent authoritarian relapse can carry them: they may be able to generate regime change but have difficulty translating the legitimacy of the revolution into the authority of regime through militarized politics, the communication blockade. Youth leadership in the long term will demand security assurances, induction in transition, and safeguards to electronic and physical gatherings.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative design to examine the political impact of young people across Africa, focusing on Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Sudan. By integrating surveys, digital data, and qualitative interviews, the research aims to capture both measurable patterns and contextual dynamics of youth political engagement. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design which will give quantitative evidence on young people's participation, online mobilisation can be captured using digital trace data, and interviews/focus groups can be conducted by providing qualitative knowledge. This triangulation increases the validity and depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The sampling and data collection was done on people aged 18-35 to compare with the older adults (36-60). The sample is drawn using multi-stage stratified sampling, whereby 1,500 respondents (n = 6,000 total) by country are selected across the regions and urban-rural divides. Such a sample size guarantees quality national estimates and a  $\pm 3$  margin of error. Lists will be weighted against census distributions, and missing values will be imputed by multiple imputation methods (Little & Rubin, 2019).

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Youth Demographics and Political Potential**

The African continent is the youngest, and the population under 25 years of age constitutes more than 60 per cent of the African population (United Nations, 2022). The population below 30 is 70 percent in Nigeria and 59 percent in Kenya, South Africa and Sudan (World Bank, 2023). This demographic hegemony gives the numeric ability to influence elections, demonstrations, succession of leaders. Survey results taken in this research affirm that there were high levels of political awareness: 72 percent of the young people in Nigeria, 68 percent of the young people in Kenya, 65 percent of the young people in South Africa and 74 percent of the young people in Sudan indicated that there were lively discussions about governance and reform.

### **Electoral Engagement and Representation**

Findings indicate strong youth engagement at the electoral level but weak transition into leadership. During the election in 2019 election in Nigeria, only 51 per cent of registered voters belonged to the age bracket of 18-35, but only below 6 per cent of elected politicians belonged to the same age bracket (Ibrahim & Abubakar, 2020). In Kenya, a similar pattern can be seen as young people make up 40 percent of the voters in the 2022 elections but hold just 5 percent of the parliamentary seats (Maina, 2022). In South Africa, there is also somewhat improved representation in terms of youth quotas in the party systems but the true political authority lies to the older elites. The post-2019 transitional politics in Sudan signify the role of youth as medial actors in the process of overthrowing the regime, but the institutionalisation of their leadership experience was meagre (El-Gizouli, 2020). The results highlight a structural mismatch between young people as citizens and young people as leaders.

### **Protest Movements and Extra-Institutional Politics**

One of the strongest findings of this study is the significance of youth-led protest movements. Utilizing the digital sphere, the Nigerian youth mobilised more than 20 million people into participating in the #EndSARS movement of 2020, which pressured the country to engage in the discussion of police brutality (Iwilade, 2021). The #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests showed how digitally web-savvy young people can impact the debate on fiscal policy in Kenya. The #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (2015-2017) transformed the policy of higher education funding and proved the effectiveness of long-term mobilization based on university networks (Luescher et al., 2017). In early January 2019, they played a role in unleashing mass protests that led to the ouster of Omar al-Bashir after 30 years of his rule through sit-in protests and enduring government efforts to quash them even with violent oppression (De Waal, 2020). IM raised elsewhere, youth have been shown to be effective in creating a mobilization beyond the institutional structure, but there is a challenge of transforming the mobilization energy into institutional change in the long term.

### **Digital Activism and Political Innovation**

The study confirms that digital platforms are pivotal in youth political engagement. The percentage of Nigerian youth and Kenyan youth who used the social media as their main source of obtaining

political information was more than 80 and 76 respectively compared to 58 and 62 in South Africa and 62 in Sudan. Certain hashtags, like #EndSARS, #FeesMustFall, and #SudanUprising, demonstrate how digital activism helps bypass the state-constrained media and form transnational solidarity. Nonetheless, governments have countered this by shutting down the internet, spying and cracking down. During the 2019 protests, Sudan was blocked on the internet for more than 50 days in a row, and Nigeria blocked Twitter altogether for seven months in 2021, affecting youth activism most due to its disproportionate effect on the rest of the citizens (Freedom House, 2022). These all point to the contradiction between emancipatory and contested digital political spaces.

### **Barriers to Leadership**

Despite widespread activism, youth face persistent barriers to formal leadership. The structural constraints are issues such as restricted political party systems, the expensive cost of candidacy and gerontocratic political cultures. As a case in point, even though the Not Too Young To Run Act (2018) introduced in Nigeria lowered the age requirements for holding political positions, financial and party gatekeeping tools still deny younger candidates their space (Omotola, 2020). In Kenya and Sudan, patronage systems of the past have been rooted on the basis of loyalty rather than competence, and in South Africa, the radical voice of the youth has been temporarily marginalised in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) within its Youth League. These impediments are the reason that youths continue to be strong mobilisers yet peripheral leaders within state institutions.

### **Regional Comparisons and Cross-Cutting Trends**

Comparing across cases, several cross-cutting patterns emerge. One is that youth exert power mainly by numbers and destructive ability as opposed to institutional power. Second, digital technology becomes at once the power provider and a zone of conflict. Third, although protest movements can gain visibility and even short-term gains, there is no institutional absorption mechanism, which means they are disillusioned. Nonetheless, the African phenomenon called 'youthquake' indicates a long-term shift of a generation: in each of the four countries, more than 65% of the young people interviewed were of the opinion that their generation will change the face of African leadership in the next 20 years.

### **Discussion**

The findings suggest that Africa's youthquake is both a force of disruption and a signal of transformation. The figures and lack of structural strength identify that the numbers in strength, but not in the African political structure, show critical contradictions. In the areas of mobilisation and agenda-setting, the influence of youth is undisputable, whereas older elites are careful guardians of the leadership. This forms a crossover that puts youths under pressure from society, combined with exclusion from society. This cycle may produce political instability in case institutional structures do not incorporate youthful needs in the running of governance. On the

other hand, effective harnessing of young people in polity can free the continent of the demographic dividend and lead to more accountable, innovative and responsive political regimes.

In the last analysis, the youthquake is not a quite short-lived episode but a structural reality of the political future of Africa. The extent to which the energy of the young people is an engine of democracy versus repeated rounds of protest and repression will depend in large part on each generation of youth coming to be valued as stakeholders and not outsiders.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon often described as Africa's "youthquake" underscores a profound demographic and political reality: young people are no longer peripheral actors in the continent's governance systems but are increasingly the decisive force shaping its future. The rapidly growing youth population in Africa, with more than 60 percent being below 25 years, forms a one-piece political bloc on the continent (United Nations, 2022). They are both agents and subjects of political transformation: they have a central role in the way they are demographically important, digital fluent, and have the power to mobilize, but this is paradoxical. They possess extraordinary power in agenda setting, disruption of authoritarian behaviors and in advocacy of reforms, yet continue to suffer the marginalization of institutionalised structures of leadership.

The findings highlight a recurring contradiction between youth activism and systemic integration. In Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Sudan, youth have consistently shown political power in terms of their participation in elections, social media activism and protests through #EndSARS, #FeesMustFall, and the Sudanese uprisings. These movements have redrawn the terms of discussion in the streets, compelled governments to reckon with corruption, inequality and repression and increased the sense of urgency about change (Iwilade, 2021; Luescher et al., 2017; El-Gizouli, 2020). However, youths continue to have a low presence in formal political institution despite the above accomplishments. Their access to the political leadership positions has been systematically denied by the entrenched patronage networks, gerontocratic political cultures, and financial barriers (Omotola, 2020). Such a discrepancy between activism and institutional imbibing presents the danger of circularities of protest and repression instead of maintaining inclusive governance.

Simultaneously, the youthquake proves the revolutionary role of digital activism. Social media has given people an unprecedented ability to mobilize and display transnational solidarity as well as hold those who control the narratives exercising power in place through mechanisms of accountability (Freedom House, 2022). But analysis of the growing use of digital repression in the State in the form of internet shutdowns, surveillance and censorship indicates a growing conflict over political space. The future course of governance and civic liberties in the African continent will be dictated by whether the African governments decide to support or oppose digital youth activism.

The wider implication of this study implies that the political stability and democratic deepening in Africa depend on its ability to transform young people into policy makers, agitators and agenda setters rather than protestors, disenfranchised voters, or bona-fide leaders. Not utilising this demographic dividend exposes one to the danger of political alienation, radicalisation and frequent instability. But on the other side, innovation, accountability and renewed legitimacy in governance may easily be opened by proactive efforts that would consist of reducing the obstacles to candidacy, political party reform, funding youth leadership development, and institutionalisation of digital spaces of civic life.

African youthquake is not a wave, but it is a phenomenon, a generational change in the political field. The continent is enjoying the emergence of a politically enlightened, technologically enabled and globally networked generation who can no longer keep silent when they feel excluded. Their mobilisation is a challenge and a possibility: a challenge to traditional political orders that do not want to change and an opportunity for a new democracy based on inclusion and intergenerational fairness. Should the leaders of Africa not act in a constructive manner, they run the risk of alienating the larger portion of their population and of weakening their political stability in the long term. Provided they can succeed in identifying, enabling, and formalising youth leadership, then the African youthquake might be preserved not as an instance of state failure, but as the moment when the continent seized its demographic dividend and led to a more equitable, transparent and progressive political future.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Institutional Reforms to Enhance Youth Political Participation**

African states have the duty to reform constitutional and electoral systems to provide a favourable environment to allow youths to contest politics. Despite such legislation as the Not Too Young to Run Act in Nigeria making some age-based changes, such initiatives have been undercut by a prohibitive financial barrier to entry and political gatekeeping (Omotola, 2020). Governments ought to address these issues by lowering the nomination fees, establishing campaign financing laws and widening subsidy plans that will have everyone in a position to support younger candidates. Any youth quotas should also be implemented in political party candidate lists as enforced by independent electoral commissions to ensure presence in the local electorate, as well as at the national level (Resnick, 2019).

### **2. Strengthening Political Parties as Gateways for Youth Inclusion**

Africa is still ruled by gerontocratic parties that are opposed to renewal of generational power. It is thus very vital to restructuring internal party organs. Parties are advised to democratize their nominating procedures and institutionalize mentorship programs where experienced leaders can guide their younger aspirants; they should also introduce binding youth wings with decision-making power as opposed to being ceremonial (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2020). Regional regulatory bodies including African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS) can also condition compliance by tying reforms by parties to access electoral observation assistance and governance financial aid.

### **3. Expanding Civic Education and Political Literacy**

Due to the absence of regular civic education, one of the main problems of effective and long-term participation of the youth in politics is the absence of such education. Compared to traditional ways of political participation, digital activism has enabled the voices of young people to be heard; however, to convert the energy behind protests into lasting influence over policies, they need to learn more about the governing systems and the law-making process. The governments, civil society organizations, and universities are proposed to design the youth-focused curriculum of civic education that would emphasize digital rights, democratic accountability, and conflict resolution (Luescher et al., 2017). Investment made into civic literacy programs will make the youth not only active in politics but also make them politically effective.

### **4. Harnessing Digital Platforms for Inclusive Governance**

Digital spaces have become important places of youth mobilization and many governments are reacting by shutting down the internet, censoring, and monitoring civic activity in these spaces (Freedom House, 2022). African states need to move in the opposite direction by adopting digital forms of participation through e-petitions, participatory budgeting websites and open data portals in order to foster inclusive governance. It is also important that regional institutions would provide frameworks to defend digital freedoms in the fight against disinformation. Governments can formalize the digital civic space so that the activism on social media can become fusion policy discussion.

### **5. Economic Empowerment as a Foundation for Political Agency**

It is strongly associated with socioeconomic marginalization of youth who are excluded in politics. Governmental policies such as low levels of unemployment and underemployment, already estimated at more than 60 percent of the youth population in sub-Saharan Africa (International Labour Organization, 2021), are also a barrier to financial autonomy required to undertake political activity. Youth entrepreneurship projects, innovation centres and focused job creation policies are therefore aspects that governments should consider as part of their broad development strategies, which in turn entail political empowerment. The empowerment of the economy makes one less vulnerable to the patronage systems and enhances the ability of the youth to develop and autonomously achieve political dominance.

### **6. Regional and Continental Policy Harmonisation**

The African Youth Charter (2006) of the African Union and Agenda 2063 are youth empowerment frameworks that have not been uniformly applied among states. Progress should be tracked by creating a continental youth political index that measures representation in parliaments, cabinet

and party leadership. Instituting regional economic communities (RECs) will have the responsibility of implementing accountability mechanisms, with rewards being given to those countries whose measurable progress in youth inclusion is observed, and regimes that stifle youths face failing sanctions.

## **7. Fostering Intergenerational Dialogue and Leadership Transition**

The difference in generations has to be closed to have a sustainable future in the political sphere. The states, traditional authorities, and civil society members ought to provide organised platforms of intergenerationally based discussions where policy priorities could be negotiated. This will decrease contradictions between institutionalised elites and young capital weapons and allow shared governance. Institutionalising the gradual transition of leadership helps African societies to avert the unstable dynamics of protest and repression that have characterised the last several decades.

## **Policy Framework Model for Youth Political Inclusion in Africa**

### **1) Structural Reforms**

- **Electoral & Legal Adjustments**

- Lower candidacy age requirements.
- Enforce youth quotas in parliaments and political parties.
- Reduce financial barriers (campaign costs, nomination fees).

### **2) Political Party Transformation**

- **Internal Democracy**

- Institutionalise youth wings with decision-making power.
- Establish mentorship programs linking older leaders with youth.
- Mandate transparent nomination processes.

### **3) Civic Education & Political Literacy**

- **Knowledge Empowerment**

- Nationwide civic education campaigns.
- Youth-focused curricula in schools/universities.
- Training on digital democracy, governance, and policy-making.

### **4) Digital Governance & Participation**

- **Technology for Democracy**

- Online petitions and participatory budgeting platforms.
- Protection of digital freedoms and youth activism.
- Regional frameworks against internet shutdowns and censorship.



## 5) Economic Empowerment

- **Linking Livelihood to Political Agency**
  - Youth-focused entrepreneurship and innovation hubs.
  - Employment generation programs linked to governance reforms.
  - Independent funding opportunities for young politicians.

## 6) Regional & Continental Integration

- **African Union & RECs as Catalysts**
  - Enforce the *African Youth Charter*.
  - Develop a “Youth Political Inclusion Index.”
  - Benchmark and monitor progress across states.

## 7) Intergenerational Dialogue

- **Bridging the Leadership Divide**
  - Platforms for negotiation between youth and older elites.
  - Gradual leadership transition strategies.
  - Conflict resolution and collaborative governance mechanisms.

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