

The African Union (AU), the African Youth Commission (AYC) and the Pan-African Youth Union (PYU): Sabotaging or bureaucratizing the youth?

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Abstract

There now exists overwhelming evidence that many African states are gerontocracies - states wherein the leadership is way older than the average age of the population. Whereas these discussions were previously attributed to external observers of African politics, particularly observers from the western world, this question of and on African leadership has now gained domestic root. The youth of the continent has since started demanding their places at various decision-making tables within their nation states. This has led to generational antagonism of which some have led to youth-led uprisings. While there are several analyses at the state level, there has been little analysis of the relationship between the African Union (AU) and the youth of the continent. This text takes the analysis to the continental level. The text does not only concern a continental analysis, it's most important contribution is to add new developments that have not appeared in much of the contemporary literature on African development. To buttress these perspectives, the text looks at the relationship between the AU and two continental youth organizations: the PYU (Pan-African Youth Union) and the AYC (African Youth Commission). It reveals that at the time of writing, Africa was the only continent without a recognized continental youth body. The text is aimed at provoking further questions and discussions on the AU's youth discourse with this daring question: sabotaging or bureaucratizing youth?

Exclusivity and entitlement mentality of the African political elite

The African liberating generation, the generation that spearheaded the fight against colonialism in Africa, saw themselves as the only capable leaders to lead after independence. (Diop 2012) The generation that followed, particularly those born after the attainment of freedom and independence, were expected not to be critical but be obedient subjects that are grateful to the heroes who brought political freedom (Mahlatsi 2014). Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o quotes Kenyan dictator, Daniel Arap Moi, who was immaculate on the extent of loyalty he expected from his subordinates and citizens:

I call on all Ministers and Assistant Ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta's period, I persistently sang the Kenyatta tune... you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should put a full stop. This is how the country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it. (cited in Wa Thiong'o: 1986: 86)

Hifikepunye Pohamba, a freedom fighter and the former President of Namibia, stated the following when addressing the youth who were challenging the long stay in power of his generation:

This [liberation struggle] was not easy as some of you want to believe. It was hard, long and bitter and we, the old freedom fighters, fought to the end and liberated the country and the people. Some of us lost our lives because of this right cause. (cited in Shivute 2014: Para. 5)

Analogous sentiments were expressed during the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa (Chirwa 2001; Mashele 2011). Aguilar (1998) came to similar conclusions in his comparative study on the politics of Ethiopia and Kenya (East Africa), Malawi (Southern Africa), Nigeria (West Africa) and Tanzania (East Africa). In his consideration of North Africa, Moghadam's (2014) findings corroborate those of Chirwa (2001), Mashele (2011) and Aguilar (1998) on the entitlement mentality of freedom fighters. These studies further discuss

how African leaders utilized African traditions such as respect for elders to deny youthful leaders an opportunity to lead. It is for this reason, amongst many, that an image of Africa as a gerontocracy where leaders are generally older than the average population and therefore unrepresentative of her interests is ubiquitous (Adegbindin 2011; Dei 1994). This deplorable status quo did not go unnoticed. Mohammed Ibrahim, a Sudanese billionaire who is a patron of the prestigious Mo Ibrahim African leadership award, given to deserving African leaders, recently castigated African leaders for their long stay in power. He was quoted by Odunsi (2018) lamenting in a crude yet interesting language:

Please allow me to be frank, don't take offence. I wish to start from where President Obasanjo stopped about age. You have been president for so long that's why you are careful with words. You see people at 90 years and about to start new terms, you guys are crazy or what? We see people in wheelchairs unable to raise hands standing for election. This is a joke; you are free to laugh (...) the whole world already laughing at us. The US, the most important country in the world, like it or not (...). Obama who is half-African anyway was 46, 47 years. If Obama was in Kenya, what would he be doing, he would be driving bus maybe. And he was not youngest president. [Bill] Clinton and [J.F.] Kennedy were even younger. Why these big countries lead (...) men in their 40s entrust their nuclear weapon, economies, all resources and we only pick up men at 90s to lead us; to lead us where? To the grave?

This short text has its foundation in these very concerns and sentiments. Youth political participation at the continental level cannot be understood without looking at the politics at the state level; said differently, the local provides content to the universal. The long established attitude and orientations of African states' leaders like President Pohamba, President Arap Moi and others towards youth have been transferred to the level of continental representation within the African Union, where youth matters are increasingly seen as peripheral and nonconsequential. Subsequently, a situation has arisen whereby, after 19 January 2018 (AU 2018a), the continent no longer had an officially recognized continental youth organization. The text looks at the historical relationship between the

OAU/AU and the main continental youth organizations PYU (Pan-African Youth Union) and AYC (African Youth Commission) to make this assessment. Following this assessment, it then looks at recent developments before concluding with the rhetorical question as to whether the AU is busy sabotaging and/or bureaucratizing the youth.

Historical sketch of OAU/AU and youth development agenda

The continental youth development agenda can only be understood in the context of the policy instruments and developments of the AU. It is important to trace the youth discourse in fitting historical context. At the peak of Africa's fight against colonial occupation, the youth of Africa established the Pan-African Youth Movement (PYM) in 1962 (NUEYS 2012). This was a year before the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established on 25 May 1963. The PYM mainly consisted of the youth of African ruling parties in the liberated zones and youth wings of liberation movements in particular (NUEYS 2012). This is a confirmation that the youth of Africa have been involved and organized themselves during the difficult times in the fight for freedom and independence. That African youth are excluded from leadership in post-colonial Africa by their elders who openly argue that they deserve to be in leadership because of their exclusive heroic deeds during the liberation struggle is thus a misappropriation of history for youth played a prominent role in the same struggle.

Scholars such as Baines (2007) have shown sufficient evidence on the significant role played by the youth in the liberation struggle to contradict the exclusive heroic mentality justifying an entitlement culture by the African ruling elites and prolonging their stay in power. The 1976 Soweto Uprising in South Africa, for example, an uprising against the apartheid regime by students and youth, is acknowledged as a decisive event in the fight against apartheid in South Africa (Baines 2007). Arguing the case for Namibia, Martin Shalli, a freedom fighter and former head of the Namibia Defense Force makes this point more clearly:

It can be argued that naturally the youth had to be at the forefront of the armed struggle due to various factors such as their numbers. To give an idea of what I am talking about let us look at this statistics or figures: PLAN [People's Liberation Army of Namibia] had roughly

twenty thousand men and women under arms, and 95% of those were youth. This represents about 40% of SWAPO exiles. Average age at different stages, 1975 was 22, 1980 was 24, 1985 was 27, and by the end of the war in 1989 was 30. What does this tell us? It tells us about active youth involvement and at grand scale, plain and clear. It also quite clearly explains to us that the youth bore the brunt of the war and that those whose blood waters our freedom are overwhelmingly the youth, close to 100%. Is that not a great sacrifice by the youth of this great land, Land of the Brave, towards the attainment of freedom and independence that we enjoy and continue to enjoy today? The answer is a resoundingly simple yes. (Shalli 2013)

Given this history, one would assume that youth would still be at the center of the development discourse in post-colonial Africa. Instead, the liberating leaders, at both state and continental level continued with their entitlement mentality, asserting themselves as the only capable leaders in society and using heroism to justify their long stay in power at the expense of energetic and capable younger leaders (Mashele 2011).

This same attitude characterized the approach to youth matters at the continental level. Continental youth organizations such as PYM, although recognized by the OAU, faced several difficulties. It was forced to change its name from Pan-African Youth Movement (PYM) to Pan-African Youth Union (PYU) and changed its headquarters two times: from Conakry, in Guinea, to Algiers, Algeria in 1967; from Algiers to Khartoum, Sudan, in 2008 (NUEYS 2012). There is no evidence of considerable support by the OAU to the PYM/PYU. In 1999, the OAU started to launch its transformation from OAU (Organisation of African Unity) to AU (African Union). This transformation was not concerned with youth political participation. By its own admission, the AU's commitment to youth development and welfare only manifested in 2006, 44 years after the PYM was established and 43 years after the establishment of the OAU, when the Heads of State and Government adopted the African Youth Charter (African Union Commission 2017). In 2016, 10 years since this charter was adopted, during the review of this charter, it was found that many African states still hadn't ratified the policy guideline.

In 2017, the African Youth Commission (AYC) was established in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The AYC came into being as a successor of the African Union Youth Working Group (AUYWG), established following a youth consultative meeting that took place from 1 to 4 November 2013 on AU's Agenda 2063 (African Youth Commission 2017). Whereas the PYU was seen as a rigid continental organization, whose membership is open only to official government bodies, called Youth Councils, the AYC membership is broad-based and covers youth structures beyond the Youth Councils. With the establishment of the AYC in 2017, the continent then had two competing continental youth advocacy groups. Apart from the fact that the establishment of another youth organization indicated the lack of congruence in continental youth agenda, this development in itself served as an indictment on the efficiency and effectiveness of the AU and its youth development agenda.

“Throwing away the water with a baby” – The AU's abandoning and disassociation from AYC and PYU

As stated earlier, both the OAU and the AU had maintained cordial relations with the PYU. This cordial relationship, however, did not lead to substantive benefits to the PYU. It was for this reason that the PYU was unable to live up to its mandate causing other youth to establish another continental youth body. The AU's failure to instrumentalise the PYU was acknowledged by the then chair of the AU, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who admitted that the PYU needed to be assisted and revitalized. She was speaking on 1st November 2012 during the African Youth Day (The Point 2012). The AYC also faced similar challenges, and worse, at its inception. While it was set to hold its Inaugural General Assembly to elect its founding leadership in January 2017, the AU released the following statement distancing itself from the organization:

With regard to the upcoming AYC Annual General Assembly on the 22-25 January 2017 in Addis Ababa, we wish to categorically state that we have not been involved in the coordination of this event as has been erroneously reported across various media. Unfortunately, this avoidable situation is a misrepresentation that has caused confusion, particularly among prospective participants, and

simultaneously hampered the event's credibility. (African Union Youth Division 2017)

To the AYC and those set to attend the General Assembly, this announcement was a serious blow not only to the event but also to the credibility of this youth organization. Such a pronouncement was welcomed by the PYU that saw itself as the legitimate continental body in a manner similar to the entitlement mindset of freedom fighters. This celebration was not to last long. Following its chaotic congress in the Sudan in December 2017, the AU again released a statement, this time on the PYU, stating the following:

The Commission of the African Union has noted the results of the election of the new Executive Committee of the Pan African Youth Union (PYU) during the Congress held in Khartoum Sudan from the 19th to the 21st of December, 2017. The Commission has also noted the reactions of the various youth organizations and young people who PYU purportedly sent as its representation to the elections (...). Consequently, the AUC confirms its full de-association from the PYU and that it does not recognize the current executive committee. In principle, AU stands for democratic governance and due process. The AUC does not recognize or support any faulty procedures or any decisions that undermine these principles. In light of this, the Commission, therefore, wishes to inform the public that the current Executive Committee is not recognized by the African Union Commission. (AU 2018a)

With this statement, it was then clear that, starting from the 19th January 2018, the African continent has been without a recognized continental youth body. This is not only scandalous but bespeaks a mindset of African leaders who see the youth as nonconsequential and dispensable appendixes of development discourse. Africa is thus the only region without an officially recognized continental youth body. While the AU's concerns of "erroneous reporting" and "misrepresentations" as it related to the AYC General Assembly and the democratic concerns relating to the PYU Congress are genuine concerns, it is doubtful if the position taken by the AU was prudent, or whether an alternative path could have been

explored. For example, the AU, instead of disassociating itself or releasing sabotaging statements on the activities of the youth, could have sought audience with these youth organizations and work with the youth to resolve their problems and lead these organizations to desired positions. When observed closely, the actions of the AU towards both PYU and AYC is tantamount to an old phrase of “throwing away the water with the baby”.

New attempts to address the vacuum by bureaucratizing the youth

The AU's failure to support these organizations and disassociation from the same has evidently left a serious vacuum in continental youth development agenda setting. Seemingly being aware of its errors of omission and commission, the AU, on the 23 April 2018, released a statement announcing its plans to appoint an AU Youth Envoy. The statement reads as follows:

The Youth Envoy shall be the spokesperson of African youths before continental decision-making bodies. He/she shall encourage AU Member States to define and implement youth-related policies at national, regional and continental levels. He/she shall also advocate for better youth mainstreaming in decision-making and will promote African core values across the continent and beyond. The AU Youth Envoy will also have the critical task to reconcile AU efforts on youth development with the aspirations of African youths, help in enhancing AU response to youth needs, and break communication barriers between the African Union and African youths. (AU 2018b)

Placing in the term of reference as a task of the Youth Envoy - to “help in enhancing AU response to youth needs, and break communication barriers between the African Union and African youths” - is a conspicuous admission that the AU has not been responding to youth needs, and that communication barriers exist between the AU and the youth. When looked at in the context of the AYC and PYU, it could be understood that the absence of the relationship between these organizations and the AU is being felt. Whereas the PYU and AYC are independent organizations pursuing the interest and programs of their members, the Youth Envoy

would be a bureaucrat within the AU structures and not necessarily functioning independently. Whether this bureaucratic approach and strategy to youth's political participation would work, remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen as what will come of the non-existent relationship between the AU, the AYC and the PYU.

Conclusion

Although the youth have always played a prominent role in the struggle against colonialism on the African continent, this role was relegated or dwindled into insignificance in post-colonial politics. This is true in most countries on the African continent. Contemporary Africa is a demographically young continent. This demographic reality did not find expression as far as political participation is concerned. It is for this reason that the continent can be termed a gerontocracy. In providing a historical account of the relationship between the continent and its youth, using the cases of the AYC and PYU, this text demonstrated that the OAU/AU had always given "lip-service" to the matter of youth's political participation. This sabotaging and disassociation of the AU from the AYC and PYU represents an unfortunate and scandalous development that led Africa to be the only one continent without a recognized continental youth body. While this text did not make firm conclusions, in considering the two cases it provided a basis for further research and discussions on the question of what exactly the AU is doing with the youth.

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