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More youths and women, please!

Nigeria is a country of old men – women and youths are still not politically represented in Africa's most populous nation

Two months after the general elections in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, things are back to normal. The incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari, a 76-year-old general and former military Head of State, clearly defeated his challengers. With his All Progressives Congress (APC), he has been propagating the fight against rampant corruption, economic recovery and the restoration of security. Especially the North-Eastern part of the country has been terrorised by the Islamist insurgency group Boko Haram for over 10 years.

While his progress in economic recovery and restoration of security can at best be described as moderate, Buhari's anti-corruption war is the subject of much contention. Some have trust in his efforts while others criticise his onslaught as one-sided and directed mostly at the opposition.

The main opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), had put forward 72-year-old Atiku Abubakar, former Vice-President from 1999 to 2007, as their candidate. He's a millionaire entrepreneur and now four-time presidential candidate who faced several allegations of corruption. Even though the euphoria and hope that accompanied Buhari's election in 2015 had long vanished, Atiku seemed for most to be no viable alternative to Buhari.

The opposition parties failed to come up with a joint candidate who could challenge the political establishment and bring fresh air into the country's political scene. The tense security situation along with the postponed elections, which was announced only a few hours before, resulted in the lowest voter turnout since 1999 with only 35 per cent. This suggests that a large portion of the population see little potential for positive change by casting their votes. Many others just sold their votes to at least reap some benefit. Moreover, the two elderly men's campaign was rather dispassionate and accompanied by frequent political manoeuvring and allegations against each other, rather than programmatic discussions.

In the aftermath of the election, disillusionment and frustration are widespread. The 2019 elections have shown that a real alternative to the established system of the 'rule of old men' has yet to emerge. Women and youths in particular, who make up the majority of the Nigerian population, are not adequately represented in the political system.

Nigeria at lowest rate of women representation

Women are gravely underrepresented in Nigerian politics. Currently, Nigeria has the lowest rate of female representation in parliaments across the continent. Globally, it ranks 181 out of 193 countries, according to the International Parliamentary Union. Provisions to increase the percentage of women in elected and appointed positions to 35 per cent had no success. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, the gap between men and women in areas like economic participation, education and health, is not nearly as wide as in the realm of politics.

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According to Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), 47 per cent of registered voters and only 7 of the 71 presidential candidates for the 2019 elections were women. Nonetheless, there has never been a female president or state governor elected in Nigeria. Women currently make up less than 6 per cent of the national parliament members. And it doesn't look much better when looking at candidatures: of the candidates for the national and gubernatorial elections, women made up roughly one-in-eight. Why's that?

Women are deterred from entering politics by the patriarchal system, in which men are believed to be natural leaders of women, and a lack of transparency in the candidate selection process. Cultural believes that women are supposed to be in charge of the family rather than being in politics and money politics support the existing system. Moreover, the lack of a well organised grassroots women's movement backing and supporting promising candidates results in poor political participation. Obiageli Ezekwesili, known through the successful #BringBackOurGirls campaign, bowed out to the final run-up for the presidential elections disillusioned. 'We are waiting for the day the political class will now change and decide to be nice. They are never going to be nice, quote me. There is no incentive on the part of our political class to do things

differently'.

Too young to run?

While registered youth voters (up to the age of 35) make up more than half of the voter population of 84 million, the young generation has no say in Nigerian politics. There might have been a sense of hope in 2018 within the circles of youth activists: as a result of the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign initiated by the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), a law was passed that opened up the political space for increased youth participation. It reduced the age for presidential candidates from 40 to 35 and for House of Representatives candidates from 30 to 25 years.

Overall, there's a positive trend in youth participation, as youth candidacy has increased from 21 per cent in 2015 to 34.2 per cent in the 2019 elections. However, the actual numbers of young women and men under the age of 35 voted into elected positions are more sobering. According to YIAGA, only twelve youth candidates under 35 managed to get elected into the House of Representatives, an increase by nine compared to 2015.

At least however, the discourse has shifted and the lack of representation is discussed publicly.

For most Nigerian political parties, young people are at best seen as supporters, mobilisers or political foot soldiers. They are hired to instigate violence, manipulate the elections and intimidate the opposing parties. Some of the smaller parties actively tried to promote women and youth participation through lowering the horrendous costs for the candidacy forms. But for the major parties, only a few of the women and youth emerged from the primaries on state and federal political level.

The system remains the same

All in all, the Nigerian political system remains dominated by temporary political alliances of 'old men' and sustained by huge flows of money. Politics is a way of getting access to huge spoils of money. Political candidates have to invest heavily or are being invested in by others. The aim is to get a return on that investment. Politicians, rather than considering themselves as representatives of the people, have obligations or intentions that are more monetary than anything else. Women and youths do not feature well in this money game. Because their probability to win elections is more unlikely, they are not considered a secure

investment.

Unfortunately, in the 2019 elections, political movements advocating for the participation of youth and women were unable to challenge the political structures of patriarchy supporting corruption and making Nigerian politics a dirty business. Nonetheless, first important steps towards change have been made, even though they did not translate into votes yet to a significant degree.

At least however, the discourse has shifted and the lack of representation is discussed publicly. Nevertheless, it will be crucial to actually increase the representation of women and young people, without letting them become a part of the predominant system of money politics that currently exists. Instead of seeing their future turn as a chance to get their own piece of the national pie, women and young people need to be ready and willing to be monitored and held accountable. Accordingly, it's important to nurture and select a future class of principled politicians, especially women and young people, who are ready to truly represent the Nigerian people.



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