

Challenging The Narrative

Youth movements are defining what democracy looks like for young people

By Irene Ikomu, Hurford Youth Fellow (2019)

Introduction

It is unfortunate that when it comes to civic and political engagement, young people are often framed in the mass media as apathetic, disengaged, and removed from civic action—even though youth are at the forefront of most social and political movements today. If judged by voter turnout alone, it is easy to conclude that youth are disconnected from democracy. In South Africa's latest elections held in May 2019, registration among voters aged 18 to 29 were the lowest it has been in a decade;¹ up to 6 million eligible youth did not register to vote.² But young people's civic role in societies goes beyond casting a ballot, many of us engage in our communities and societies in ways that are not captured by traditional civics markers.

Understandably, elections traditionally play a unique role in determining the health of a democracy. Therefore, measuring civic participation by regular selection of political leadership through voting and political party participation is necessary. But should it be the main standard for participation? Young people, through less formal organising are positively influencing political development in their countries and I will highlight three ways I see the most impact of youth movements for democracy.

Interviews with youth democracy activists and organisation leaders, as well as looking at the success of different youth movements, show that while young people are increasingly feeling disconnected from traditional channels of participation, they are actively involved in movements that are setting a higher standard of accountability of political leaders. They also show that youth are at the forefront of shaping conversations on national policies, including challenging long standing but negative national policies; and they are challenging traditional political organising by reconnecting politics to the grassroots. Largely outside the realm of traditional politics.

Disconnected from Traditional Politics

"It is not that youth do not care for traditional politics, but when you do not see yourself represented, then you do not believe democracy works for you and so you find alternatives."- Jatzel Roman, General Coordinator of the Latin America Youth Network for Democracy

I see traditional politics as the formal participation mechanisms that make up a democratic government- voting, joining a political party, running for office, election campaigns, and representative legislation. Experts are rightly concerned about the

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-30/youth-voters-at-20-year-low-as-south-africa-protests-beat-polls>

² <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2019-04-29-youth-shun-vote-25-years-after-sas-first-free-election/>

stability of democracies around the world,³ and for young people, the frustration with the system is the feeling of exclusion and limited representation within traditional politics. For example, Latin America has some of the youngest presidents in the world. This includes, 37 year old Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, 39 year old Carlos Alvarado of Costa Rica and 42 year old Ivan Duque Margue in Colombia. Yet a survey conducted among young people, found that 43% of the young people surveyed in the Southern Cone, 60% in Central America, the Caribbean and the Andes, and 90% in North America think that their country is not very, or not at all democratic and despite some institutional advances, marginalised voices were still excluded.⁴

The biggest point of frustration is not with the system of democracy itself, but the failure of traditional institutions to be more inclusive in their channels of participation. Political parties are highly hierarchical and structural, making it hard for young people to fully take advantage of the institution. Challenges like the very high cost of party politics, the preference of party loyalists over competent individuals and limited technical expertise among youth, limit participation and dampen interest even where political parties have youth wings.

This decreasing trust is also translated into voter turnout. It is the strength of the party a candidate is affiliated with, rather than the connection to citizens that ensures one's victory. The system does the work and in turn spreads apathy. Along this decline in youth

trust in traditional processes, is a wave of largely youth led political innovation that is actively shaping the world today; young people have chosen platforms that are an easier entree to channel their civic and political engagement.

Informal mechanisms like attending a protest, joining a civil society campaign, or using social media to share an opinion on a particular policy, tend to be more inclusive of young people than traditional political channels, as these are more horizontal, more transparent, and more invested in identifying specific problems affecting the demography. Where political parties have increasingly focused on competition for power, social movements are amplifying the voices of citizens that do not feel heard and highlighting critical social and economic issues that are usually not even on the agenda of political parties. This distinction alone has been one of the most important triggers for appeal of youth movements.

And so today, youth are more often than not, communicating with and influencing each other without the need for traditional political structures. Blogs, Twitter, Youtube videos and even art and music are opening up new ways through which young people share their opinion and seek to effect change. What these movements show is that if you build enough peer and public consensus on an issue, the government has no choice but to address the matter, or at the very least respond to you.

How Youth are Engaging

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https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html?_r=0

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciabierta/transforming-political-participation/>

*‘We considered founding a new political party, but quickly dismissed the idea. We felt there was a need for a new movement and area of expression, inclusive and open to all. We felt the expression “y’en a marre” described the general feeling of the population very well and quickly agreed on that name’*⁵ Aliou Sane, journalist and founding member, **Yen a’marre** movement in Senegal

In recent history, the Arab Spring is usually the first point of reference for a discussion on how youth are using new tools to disrupt politics and effect change. Frustrated by public corruption, economic woes, human rights violations and oppressive regimes, youth took part in a wave of pro-democracy protests that turned public plazas like Cairo’s Tahrir Square into sites of struggle. Young activists weren’t the only people who participated in the demonstrations that saw the ouster of presidents like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, but these protests could not have occurred without the ideological and numerical push of a huge mass of youth.⁶

Since the 2010 Arab Spring, the world has witnessed an upward surge in citizen led movements and felt the mobilising influence of social media in shaking up global politics with the intensity, frequency and geographical spread hitting unprecedented highs around the world.⁷ A trend that started in non-democratic countries, has since spread across the world. Fueled by social media, these movements are

able to galvanise nationwide support without the help of traditional political institutions or even media houses.

These movements are ensuring accountability. In Guatemala, a government corruption scheme uncovered in 2015, involving more than a dozen high-ranking officials, sparked a movement led by a social media-savvy cohort of young Guatemalans using the hashtag: **#RenunciaYaFase2**, or “Resign already, phase 2.” For five months, thousands of people poured into the streets of the capital, eventually sweeping out President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti. Citizen movements similar to, sparked by anger over government corruption and abuse of power, also contributed to the resignation of presidents in Burkina Faso, Brazil, and South Korea, among others.

Perhaps one of the greatest efforts of these movements is in reforming negative policies. Important forward movement around issues of race, access to firearms, gender, and even drug policy is being driven outside traditional structures, by the activism of youth. Movements do this by amplifying usually unheard voices, offering new perspectives and untold angles on the impact of government policies. **The White Noise Movement**, largely drawing from youth in Tbilisi nightclubs in Georgia’s capital and using social media to spread news on arrests, pushed back against the country’s extraordinarily harsh drug laws. Anyone caught with even trace amounts of

⁵ <https://www.unric.org/en/right-to-participation/28099-the-movement-yen-a-marre-weve-had-enough>

⁶ According to analyst Chloe Mulderig of Boston University

⁷ Richard Youngs book, *Civic Activism Unleashed, New Hope or False Dawn for Democracy?*, Oxford University Press

drugs can face years in prison or fines running into tens of thousands of Euros. Currently, around 3,000 people are incarcerated long-term on these grounds, and anyone with a drugs conviction is barred from working in any government job in a country in which the government is by far the largest employer, and they must pay a large fee to leave the country. Lives are systematically destroyed, and the poor suffer the most.⁸ The Movement forced a nationwide debate on the impact of criminalisation of drugs and eventually contributed to the decriminalisation of marijuana possession.

The **#FEESMUSTFALL Movement** in South Africa also captured global attention in 2015. The goals of the movement were to stop increases in student fees as well as to increase government funding of universities, initially starting in the University of Witwatersrand, before spreading to the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University and several universities across the country. The protests were revived in 2016 when the South African Minister of Higher Education announced that there would be fee increases capped at 8% for 2017. They brought the subject of decolonisation of educational institutions and the alienation of black students and staff from university life to broader public attention using hashtags like **#RhodesMustFall**.⁹ The protests resulted in the creation in 2018 of a national bursary scheme for poor and working class students.

Lastly, youth movements are engaging grassroots and communities in ways that traditional institutions are increasingly struggling to achieve. Leaders of social movements have mustered both social and political capital, as citizens trust them to voice their concerns. The **Y'en a Marre Movement** in Senegal, started by rappers and journalists to protest ineffective government and register youth to vote using music, ended up getting 300,000 young voters to register and went from providing an alternative voice to being the voice. The movement was credited with mobilising Senegal's youth vote and ousting incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade, though the group said it did not target President Wade in particular because it is non-partisan.

Can a strong political constituency grow out of social movements built around young people, and their general mistrust in the system? Samson Itodo, the executive director of YIAGA, the organisation behind the **#NotTooYoungToRun** campaign that lowered the age limit for running for office in Nigeria, believes it is possible for youth to strengthen constituencies through movements and argues that political power is shifting from political parties to individuals. The **#NotTooYoungtoRun** movement succeed in lowering the age limit of candidates running for office to 25 years for House of Representatives and Assembly and 30 years for Senate, governorship and presidency.

Social media's multiplying effect has gone on to build tangible constituencies around

⁸ <https://mixmag.net/feature/we-went-to-georgia-to-investigate-the-threat-to-the-countrys-club-scene>

⁹ <https://csvr.org.za/pdf/An-analysis-of-the-FeesMustFall-Movement-at-South-African-universities.pdf>

individuals. In 2017, Kenyan photographer turned activist, Boniface Mwangi, launched a crowd-sourced campaign for the Nairobi Starehe constituency on Twitter to his one million followers. Mwangi built a constituency as people followed his documentation post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 and campaigns for peace, and against bad political leadership. By the end of his campaign, Mwangi had raised approximately \$ 100,000 and while he did not win the seat, opened up new possibilities for fundraising.¹⁰ The first in Kenya's political history.

In Uganda, Robert Kyagulanyi popularly known as Bobi Wine, started his music career in 1999. His music over the years connected reggae, dancehall, and afrobeat styles, with a socially conscious message. His songs articulated citizen concerns over corruption, bad governance and even issues like HIV/AIDs. His candidacy announcement for parliament in a by-election for the Kyaddondo East Constituency as well as his door-to-door walking campaign, not dependent on money to appeal to citizens attracted attention both in Uganda and abroad. As a political outlier, he has since used his subsequent win and growing popularity to launch the People Power Movement that is challenging long standing political parties like the President's NRM and the main opposition party, FDC.

Young people sense and even demand that political structures need a moral rebirth. More movements will continue to offer an alternative for participation and challenge how

traditional political structures may need to change. But shaping conversations like these comes at a high cost, especially where traditional institutions feel threatened. There is almost always backlash.

Governments are more jittery about both social media and how youth participation is being shaped by it in their countries. In Azerbaijan, seven members of the **NIDA Youth Movement**, including four board members were imprisoned for organising a mass protest against mandatory military service and the poor conditions in the army.

Conclusion

More experienced practitioners and pundits are skeptical about the sustainability of movements as a political constituency. Many believe that the loose horizontal structure of most youth movements, the single issue focus of mobilisation and the missing link to traditional institutions are hurdles against their own sustainability. But I see the future potential more positively.

Social movements are going to continue to play a role in defining politics and while they should help us rethink, improve, and restore trust in traditional politics, these movements have an important place in democracy and the right for their existence must be protected.

¹⁰ Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Kenya, Nanjala Nyabola, p.211