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DEVELOPMENTAL NATIONALISM: THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Nationalism has long been a subject of discussion in the literature of development. It helps facilitate development by creating a strong sense of national identity which allows the citizenry to commit to nation-building. This paper examines the role of the African youth in promoting the continent's development through developmental nationalism. Africa's young people are recognised as the continent's greatest assets and the most suited to play this role. The fact that the continent needs development suggests a compelling need for the potentials of youth to be harnessed to drive any development agenda. In the past, young people played historic roles in promoting development through nationalistic causes but today's youth are facing increasing difficulties in sustaining this legacy. This paper, therefore, makes a case for rebuilding this past legacy and for the empowerment of Africa's young people to drive the continent's development.

DEVELOPMENTAL NATIONALISM: THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN YOUTH

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines nationalism as loyalty and devotion to a nation, a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

In the same vein, the Encyclopaedia Britannica also defines nationalism as an ideology based on the premise that individual's loyalty and devotion to a nation-state surpass other individual or group interest (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). While nationalism does not connote disdain for other nations or other group interests, it represents patriotism, national pride and absolute loyalty to national interest before all other interests.

Nationalism has long been a subject of discussion in the literature on development. Musluk (2010) argues that nationalism came forth in many third World countries as an understanding which is thought to pave the way for development as it imagines a nation based on integrity (Muluk, C, 2010). This view is supported by Law (Law, C., 2010) who argues that in multi-cultural societies like Canada and the United States, nationalism has helped to facilitate development by creating a national identity based on shared political values. Where a strong sense of national identity exists, the citizenry commits to nation-building. The implication for multi-cultural societies like Africa is that nationalism could be paramount for the realisation of the social, economic and cultural aspirations of our people.

In what follows, an argument on why the youth are most suited to champion the cause of nationalism is presented. The different roles youth have played in promoting nationalism are also discussed citing examples from the global and African experience.

HISTORIC ROLE OF YOUTHS IN PROMOTING NATIONALISM

The world's greatest asset is the youth. Not only are they energetic, ebullient and boisterous, when they are meaningfully engaged, their productivity is higher than that of any other age group. Countries with a dominant youth population are considered as having an important advantage over countries with an ageing population. This is why countries like Japan with an ageing population are doing everything possible to reverse the trend. Japan's quest to reverse her current ageing population is explained by the productivity argument already adduced.

With this, it is clear that the youth have an important role to play in promoting nationalism. This is so because young people have the needed energy to champion nationalistic causes. Young people are very important stakeholders in society as the leaders and followers in the nearest future. As the trustees of posterity, the youth should, therefore, be concerned about playing important nationalistic roles to shape the future of their society. History shows that Africa's youth have not fallen short in playing this important role. At very critical moments in history, young people have played very prominent roles in fast-tracking development through nationalistic causes on a national and global scale. A few of these roles are highlighted below:

- Youths as Champions of a Freer, Fairer and Safer World

The Youths have made immense contributions towards promoting human freedom and dignity. In doing this, they sacrifice to help in achieving freedom for the human race. For example, the former Cuban leader, Fidel Castro was a young student at the University of Havana when he pushed for the Cuban revolution which culminated in the overthrow of Cuban President Fulgencio Batista's military junta. In the same vein, President Nelson Mandela's fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa was motivated by his experience as a young black South African student when he was expelled from the University College of Fort Hare for joining in a student protest. The acclaimed Arab Spring that has revolutionised freedom and governance in some Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East was driven by young people, who felt dissatisfied with the state of their nations.

For Africa, many cases abound. People like W.E.B. Dubois and other Pan-Africanists were at the prime of their youth when they pushed for the decolonization of Africa and the West Indies through the Pan African Congress. In the same vein, Kwame Nkrumah, Herbert Macaulay, H.O. Davies, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and others were young people when they founded organisations that fought for Africa's decolonization. It was also in the University that Wole Soyinka and some other young students founded organisations that fought corruption and injustice against black African students.

- The Youth and the Democratisation Process

The role young people have played in the democratisation process cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from confronting and even bringing down many military regimes across the world, youth movements have played very prominent roles in deepening democracy. Because the youth community is enlightened, they are wiser in their voting decisions and can easily mobilise to vote out a bad government.

- The Role of the Youth as a Pressure Group

Young people when well organised can serve as an important pressure group that can shape

governance and accountability. In 2010, when there was a leadership vacuum in the Nigerian Presidency, young Nigerians played prominent roles in supporting the Pastor Tunde Bakare-led Save Nigeria Group (SNG) through protests to bring pressure to bear on a so-called cabal to allow the then Vice-President, Goodluck Jonathan, to act as President. This was achieved through the invocation of the doctrine of necessity and a looming leadership crisis was avoided. In 2012, young people partnered with labour and civil society groups to protest against the sudden removal of fuel subsidy on January 1st, 2012 when most Nigerians got stuck in their hometowns after the Christmas holidays. The protests brought pressure on the government to reach a compromise with labour and civil society groups. The outcome was a better deal for the Nigerian masses. In the same vein, student unions have at different times fought for the interest of the student community and called ruling governments to order when necessary. One area this often plays out is when governments increase school fees without taking into account the impact this would have on family income and the standard of living in such families. Student movements have successfully resisted such arbitrary increases most times. The basis for resisting these hikes in school fees is that such increases, reduce access to education by the poor, a situation that perpetuates an elitist society while absolute poverty remains endemic. A recent case is the University fee protests led by South African Students which caused the country's president to agree to freeze fee increases across South African universities.

- Youth Groups and the Socialisation Process

Youth groups and organisations serve as a hotbed of socialisation. Such groups like clubs, societies and student unions have contributed in fast-tracking the socialisation process. This helps in preparing youth members to thrive and survive in the larger society. A key part of this process is the ideals of integrity, honesty and contentment which young people are encouraged to imbibe to make them responsible members of society.

- Youths as Tomorrow's National Manpower Stock

Youths make up tomorrow's national manpower stock. In literature, the role of human capital development has been widely discussed. The 1998 human development report was the first to recognise the critical role of human development in national development. The report recognised human capital as the real wealth of nations and the ultimate driver of sustainable development.

In line with this, Awopegba (2003) posits that the development of human capital has been recognised by development planners as an essential pre-condition for a country's economic and socio-cultural transformation. As young people such as students mature and become professionals in their chosen endeavours, they join the labour force and become part of the country's stock of human capital. When they are engaged in their fields of speciality, they contribute to society's progress and development by offering their services with vigour and enthusiasm; and displaying quality leadership skills critical for the continent's development.

DEVELOPMENTAL NATIONALISM: CONCERNS WITH TODAY'S AFRICAN YOUTH

Is today's African youth active in promoting nationalism? Or are these examples more like reliving the good old days? A few young people are still very involved in acts of nationalism and nation-building. Many of Africa's young people are involved in the activities of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) where they are making

modest contributions to national development. Nigeria and Tanzania have also conducted a successful 2015 election that saw the youth play an active role, particularly through social media.

However, it is easy to see that more progress was made in the past than at present as far as youth contributing to the promotion of nationalism is concerned. For some reasons, there has been a rapid deterioration in the role young people played in promoting nationalism and national development on almost all fronts. More African youths are taking to crimes like armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, fraud, internet scam etc. both at home and abroad. Only on April 28th, 2015, four Nigerians were put to death in Indonesia for contravening that country's drug laws. The damage such events do to Nigeria's national image can only be imagined. More African youths are concerned with how to get rich and popular through shortcuts and only a few are ready to work hard and contribute positively to nation-building.

Unlike in the past, youth participation in politics has become a sorry tale. The youth wings of most African political parties have more or less become militant wings which unscrupulous politicians use to intimidate opponents and have their way. Even the educated youths are not spared. In a recent paper presentation titled "Good Governance: Sustainability of Democracy, the Role of Students in the Forthcoming General Elections" to mark the International Day of Students, Pastor Tunde Bakare lamented that "not only has students' unionism fallen from its pinnacle of intellectual doggedness and ideological astuteness, it had also lost its activist steam, become a mere appendage of ruling political parties and a tool in the hands of corrupt politicians," (The Punch, 2014).

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN YOUTH IN PROMOTING NATIONALISM

The prominent roles played by students in the past in promoting nationalism can be re-ignited. All that is to be done is to shape and redefine these roles where necessary. Some of the measures that could be taken to re-ignite the role of students in developmental nationalism might include:

- Establishing Youth-led Community Development Service (CDS) Groups in Communities and Schools

Youth-led Community Development Service (CDS) groups should be established in our schools so that young people can contribute to the building of communities around them. Such groups would be concerned with core development issues affecting communities including poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS prevention and management, family and community health, drug abuse and other salient community development issues. This will not only foster peer-to-peer interaction among young people and allow for the free flow of innovative ideas, it will enable young people to be active in community development and instil a strong sense of responsibility in them. This could also help reduce crime and foster peace and stability in our communities. The impact of these community development service groups would be striking as it would help take development to the grassroots while making young people responsive to the needs of their communities. My experience with Project Change Initiative (PCI), a student-led community development action platform within the University was awesome. PCI helped not only to promote the ideals of good studentship in campuses but enabled members to have a sense of ownership of the campus community and be concerned about its well-being. If we could have such initiatives across all African campuses, it could indeed have a positive impact.

- Promoting Volunteerism in Communities and Schools

One way the role of the African youth in promoting developmental nationalism could be enhanced is by encouraging them to volunteer for just causes. Through volunteerism, young people would learn to do things that would benefit society while expecting no remuneration and by doing this, they would fill themselves and the continent with hope. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) should, therefore, put mechanisms in place to engage youth volunteers in facilitating their development work.

- Engaging Youths in Agenda Setting, Policymaking and Implementation

The African youth should be engaged in agenda setting, policy making and implementation primarily on issues that affect them. It is imperative that efforts should be made not only to engage the youth but to make them the fulcrum of public policy making and execution. Engaging young people like students in agenda setting and implementation will not only bring fresh ideas and greater energy to the delivery of good governance but also guarantee sustainability in the near future and the much-needed stability that every country needs to thrive and blossom.

- Encouraging Effective Partnership between Youth Groups and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Since the youth community represents an enlightened populace, civil society organisations should be encouraged to improve on their partnership with youth groups including student bodies in their campaigns. This would add steam to the efforts of such organisations to get leaders to be responsible, accountable and deliver the much-needed dividends of democracy in Africa.

- Redefining Student Unionism

Student unionism must be redefined to allow students to contribute productively to national development. This redefinition must be in such a way that unionism would not be left to unserious, unintelligent and self-seeking charlatans who have dragged student unionism in their quest for self-glory. All efforts must be made to restore student unionism to its glorious days.

- Making Civics Part of Education Curriculum

Civics should be made part of our academic curriculum from the kindergarten level to the tertiary level. This should form part of a catch-them-young strategy aimed at inculcating in young people the practical aspects of citizenship, their rights and duties, the duties of citizens to each other as members of society and to the government. In the same vein, the relevant government agencies in each African country should embark on effective campaigns targeted at young people aimed at sensitising them on their rights, obligations, conduct and privileges to enhance their role in developmental nationalism. This will educate the youth that citizenship represents the ideals of integrity, selflessness, fearlessness and service and not the vices of corruption, selfishness and personal aggrandisement.

- Promoting Good Governance and Accountability

Good governance and accountability is key to promoting developmental nationalism among the African youth. Government at all levels must be responsible and keep the social contract by ensuring that society provides an enabling society for its people to thrive and be responsible

citizens. A situation where political leaders and their cronies abdicate their obligations to the citizenry and instead steal the commonwealth and flaunt their affluence leaves nothing good for the young people to learn. Instead, it provokes the 'get-rich-quick or die trying' appetite in our youths which makes them resort to all forms of anti-social activities to survive or "belong". Our leaders should lead by example and focus on building strong institutions that will guarantee the effective delivery of good governance and accountability. The average African youth is talented and hardworking but faces a tough challenge from a society that offers limited opportunities and has allowed high youth unemployment to fester. If Africa can provide an enabling environment for her young people to thrive, then she can sit and watch her youth populace unleash their potentials and energy and make her an enviable continent.

CONCLUSION

That Africa direly needs development suggests a compelling need for the potentials of young people to be harnessed to drive developmental nationalism. Although this paper has suggested measures to achieve this, these measures would prove worthless if mechanisms are not put in place to bring them to fruition. We therefore need more actions than words to reposition the African youth to deliver on their potentials in creating the Africa we all desire: a new Africa.

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