



[No Longer on the Sidelines? Youth and Politics](#)

Both Feared and Courtied

Youth in the Spotlight of African Politics

[Anna Reismann / Benno Mühler](#)

At over 60 per cent of the population, the generation under the age of 25 represents the largest demographic group in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet most African governments fail to engage young people. While the African Union (AU) has made important progress towards improving youth policy, its ideas often lack practical solutions and are seldom implemented by member states. The latter, for their part, place too much emphasis on employment policy. Instead, the AU and its member states should do more to foster young people's participation in politics and civil society.

“This victory is not mine, but for all the citizens of our great country, especially the youth who turned out to vote in great numbers with great energy...” Cheers rang through the packed Heroes National Stadium in Zambia's capital Lusaka, interrupting the newly elected president's speech. He paused briefly, adjusted his COVID mask and returned his gaze to the speech. “This victory is not mine, but it is for all citizens of our great country, especially the youth, youth of Zambia, who turned out to vote in great numbers with great energy and passion, and made this day possible. Thank you to the youth of Zambia.”¹

In late August 2021, virtually unnoticed by the German public, Hakainde Hichilema was sworn in as the seventh president of Zambia, one of the most stable democracies on the African continent. Since Africa's second-largest copper producer opened up its democracy in 1990, many, though not all, of its changes in leadership have been achieved through free and fair elections. In three instances, the government was replaced by the opposition.² This election, too, conformed to what has been a somewhat unusual pattern for Africa, despite brief concerns that the defeated incumbent, Edgar Lungu, would not voluntarily hand over the reins when he did not initially recognise the outcome.

His presidency will be remembered as one in which freedoms were severely curtailed. Among other abuses, he had his political rival,

Hichilema, arrested and held in custody for 100 days. The latter has now – on his sixth run for office – been elected president of the country.³

An Important Voting Bloc

Hichilema, who chairs the socially liberal UNDP (United Party for National Development), mainly rode to victory on the shoulders of the younger generation. “Belly will fix it” – a reference to Hichilema's nickname “Belly” – was a familiar campaign slogan, and now that the election has been won, the younger generation has high expectations that Belly will deliver. Youth unemployment is officially around 22 per cent,⁴ and the rate of inflation in Zambia is 25 per cent. In 2020, GDP fell by 3 per cent.

“To the jobless youths”, President Hichilema continued, “a new dawn is here where you will be skilled and you will find opportunity to work or do business. In an economy that we will revive [...]. Very, very soon.”⁵

No Prospects

The youth of Africa cannot complain about a lack of attention on paper or in campaign speeches – neither in Zambia nor in the other countries on Europe's neighbouring continent. Some 60 per cent of the population of the 49 states in Sub-Saharan Africa are under 25 years of age. A demographic that is both feared and courted, they represent a potential force – one

of which governments and opposition are all too aware. However, as a rule, neither do much to bring young people on board. Promises go unfulfilled. Corruption persists. The mindset remains the same. The vast majority of the ailing national economies cling to old paradigms, failing to pick up on demographic developments in their countries. This means the continent does not make use of what is perhaps its most important resource – a resource that still has no prospects. Instead, poverty and migration pressure are on the rise, creating fertile ground for extremists.

A willingness for radical change is especially marked among young people in Uganda.

The images are familiar to anyone travelling through the continent's capitals and back country: in Addis Ababa, children roam the streets selling chewing gum and chocolate biscuits from wooden vendor trays. Between the cars parked at the ferry docks in Dar es Salaam, young men making chirping noises offer water from little plastic sachets. In villages in the Ivory Coast, the football pitch offers about the only diversion. Young girls help with the housework, while boys help in the fields and on the cacao plantation. Although primary and higher education opportunities have been greatly expanded across the continent over the past two decades, there are not enough jobs for all the school leavers and graduates.

Something's Brewing among Uganda's Youth

Uganda presents a similar picture. The year 2021 began in this land-locked East African country with the re-election of President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power for 35 years. Most of the country's citizens had not yet been born when he first entered office: 46 per cent of the population is aged 14 or younger⁶ and over three-quarters are under the age of 35.

Like in Zambia, the younger generation dominated the election in Uganda as well. The great desire for change in the world's second-youngest country – the average age here is currently 15.8⁷ – can be felt everywhere. A willingness for radical change is especially marked among young people.

There are not enough jobs. Demographic pressure continues to mount, with Uganda having recorded constant population growth of over three per cent since the turn of the millennium. Should the current trend of 3.7 per cent remain the same, today's population of 47 million will double in less than 20 years.⁸ An increasing number of people are pouring into the cities, and their resulting hopes and expectations are huge – as are their disappointments over unfulfilled desires.

Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu – better known by his stage name of Bobi Wine – was the most successful at tapping into that sentiment during the election campaign. The 40-year-old former musician counteracted the president's omnipresent campaign slogan “Securing Your Future”⁹ with his simple but drastic hashtag #WeAreRemovingADictator; a tactic that mobilised many supporters on social media. His powerful but short-lived wave of popularity also does little to hide the fact, however, that he too was unable to offer concrete solutions for young Ugandans. Instead, he fell into the category of politicians promising simple solutions to complex challenges. If, as so often happens after winning an election, a candidate fails to fulfil these promises, young people will retreat in disappointment, having lost faith in politics, and rightly so.

A Charter for Young People

In order to improve the situation for the continent's youth, the African Union incorporated the issue into its agenda 15 years ago. While the AU cannot create jobs, it can encourage its member states to formulate policies geared more strongly towards the interests and needs of young people.

At the General Assembly meeting held in 2006 in Banjul, Gambia – at that time still governed by dictator Yahya Jammeh – AU member states adopted the African Youth Charter, which remains in effect to this day. The document

emerged against the backdrop of the Millennium Development Goals, which, in addition to eliminating extreme poverty and extreme hunger, were also intended to help provide comprehensive primary education and reduce



Young men in an open gold mine in Uganda: The discourse of some regional organisations gives the impression that e-government and e-commerce are the greatest concerns of African youth. However, by far the largest share of them live in rudimentary conditions or even in poverty. Source: © James Akena, Reuters.

infant mortality rates, among other goals. The preamble to the document adopted by the member states reads, “Convinced that Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population and that through their active and full participation, Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead.” This document defined “youthful” as between the ages of 15 and 35.¹⁰

Papers and Posts Alone Do Not Constitute Success

One of the key demands of the Charter is that all AU member states develop a “national youth policy” – provided they do not yet have one. The AU hoped to assume the role of coordinator, to foster knowledge sharing between member states, and to promote more opportunities for participation within the organisation. It took nearly four years for the document to come into effect, even though ratification by 15 member states was all that was required. Of the 55 AU member states, 39 have ratified the document to date.

At the same time as the Charter came into force in 2009, the AU General Assembly also adopted its “African Youth Decade 2009–2018 Plan of Action”, formulating concrete steps for member states in order to implement the content of the Youth Charter. The AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) would provide support for developing policies and programmes aimed at raising public awareness of youth issues in Africa.

Who Are Africa’s Youth? What Do They Want?

Today’s Africa is different than it was at the time of decolonisation, and thus its youth is not the same as the founding generation. “For them, the achievement was independence. But for us, we want a borderless continent. We want e-governance. We want to live on the internet, to innovate. We want e-commerce. We want to trade”, says Aya Chebbi, who until recently was the African Union Youth Envoy.¹¹ The position was created as part of the Youth Decade Action

Plan with the aim of fostering a stronger public role for Africa’s youth. An avowed feminist, the Tunisian social media activist is young, female, a fighter: all these qualities look good in the public sphere. But do they represent Africa’s youth? And are the things that Chebbi lists in an interview with Voice of America the things that African youth really want?

32 African states have now developed a national youth policy, but much has remained theoretical.

The image of a young, tech-savvy generation of Africans, one that wears hip fashion accessories and fits the stereotype of a vibrant start-up scene is accurate only to a limited extent. The majority of Africa’s youth are poor and live – as most people generally do – in rural areas, cut off from basic infrastructure like running water and electricity, let alone fast internet. Moreover, if the term “youth” is interpreted as the stage of life between childhood and adulthood, then the expansion of basic and post-secondary education may well have extended this phase on the African continent as well. Yet the continent has not undergone an industrial revolution like that in the open societies of Western states. Traditional social structures with clear gender roles have endured. Unlike in the West, exploring your limits, finding yourself, being creative, and so on are reserved for very few young people in Africa.

A Mixed Picture

Just as the AU’s understanding of Africa’s youth – as conveyed in the person of Aya Chebbi, for instance – is misguided, the Charter as a whole needs to be viewed with a critical eye; despite constituting one of the most important initiatives and areas where the AU has made its mark to date. To begin with, there are a number of problems with the 22-page document in and of itself. It reads as though there were no

constitutions guaranteeing fundamental freedoms in force in Africa at the time of its formulation. It demands, for instance, freedoms of expression and assembly, access to education, healthcare, and many other rights for young people. Most of all, however, the AU Youth Charter has been unable to achieve any overall practical improvement to the youth policies of member states. While 32 African states have now developed a national youth policy,¹² much has remained theoretical – implementation continues to be the major problem. What is more, the majority of strategy papers give priority to employment policies.

A new youth policy for the African Union should focus on strong involvement of young people in civil society.

Youth Policy and Employment Policy Are Not the Same

The National Youth Policy of Ghana from 2010, for example, designates 19 areas in need of development, of which seven alone are dedicated to the economy.¹³ The list of similar youth policies goes on. There is no doubt that youth employment is tremendously important for Africa’s economic development – and represents an enormous opportunity, due to the size of its young, working-age population. “Real” youth policy, however, should be both more than and clearly distinct from employment policy. Especially given that the blame for unsuccessful employment policies can inherently be attributed to other causes (trade barriers, global recession, economic sanctions).

A Call to Reform AU Youth Policy

“I strive with the support of every one of you to take our Organisation out of our conference rooms, hard drives and tightly sealed files, and into the classrooms, the refugee camps, the markets of our cities and into the fields of our

villages.”¹⁴ Today, 15 years after the formulation of the AU Youth Charter, the African Union should heed the words spoken by Félix Tshisekedi, President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), at the beginning of his rotating presidency of the AU in 2021, and reform its youth policy. Aside from the fact that the charter predates several internationally important strategies and therefore does not mention them – in particular, the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN’s Youth Strategy, and the AU’s Agenda 2063 – a new AU youth policy needs to place an emphasis on supporting the young generation’s great civil society engagement. A new policy should be separate from employment policies and general development plans, focusing instead on the unique skills and characteristics of young people and attempting to harness these for development processes. Whether in rural or urban areas, whether highly or poorly educated, young people everywhere share an eagerness and a drive to participate and change their circumstances and environment for the better. When it comes to bringing young blood into its own organisation, the African Union is setting a good example. During its summit meeting in early 2021, it decided to give priority to young applicants when filling entry-level positions.

For its member states, one option would be to set up targeted support programmes that would foster the social engagement of those young people advocating for their local environment, creating social opportunities for peers, or caring for weaker members of society. Efforts like these would not require major, financially backed programmes, new structures, or positions. Social cooperation strengthens social cohesion. The younger generation wants to have a role to play, to participate and to channel their energies.

A new AU youth policy should also attach greater importance to political participation and take this more seriously. While many member states have created national youth councils, some stronger than others, these generally attract little attention, and in autocratic states are largely

Leaving the conference halls? The president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has called on the African Union to engage more closely with the realities of life on the continent. The organisation's youth policy has often lacked practical relevance. [Source: © Tiksa Negeri, Reuters.](#)

dominated by ardent supporters of the governing party. A new AU youth policy should attempt to bolster the independence and advisory roles of member states' national youth councils, both locally and across regions.

Great Lakes Youth Network for Dialogue and Peace

A project in this vein and co-financed by the EU was recently launched by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Known as the Great Lakes Youth Network for Dialogue and Peace, the project aims to work with five local partners in the Great Lakes border region between the DR Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania to establish a network of youth initiatives committed to peace. These can cover a range of issues, including democracy, employment, climate, health, equal rights, and more. Over the past few years, many young people in this high-conflict region have taken matters into their own hands, hoping to make a difference in areas where political institutions have failed or do not have the resources to succeed. Over a period of three years, the project will select up to 120 initiatives, strengthen their internal capacities, draw them into a network – that also extends beyond the region – and place them in contact with national and international decision-makers from politics, business, development, civil society, science, the media, and culture. The objective is to amplify the voice of youth in decision-making processes and to foster dialogue.

Is a Youthful Parliament a Ray of Hope?

Like so much on the continent, the question of youth and youth participation will ultimately be determined by the political will of Africa's ruling class – and that has been lacking so far. A development playing out in Uganda and other



countries, however, may help to counter the pessimistic view that nothing will ever change in Africa.

The under-25 generation made their voices heard and engaged in Uganda's most recent elections. Whether one supported them or viewed them with reservation, they could no longer be ignored – neither as voters nor as competitors for political office. Nearly 15 per cent of the representatives in Uganda's newly elected parliament are under 35. Of the 615 direct candidates in parliamentary elections, 28.5 per cent were below the age of 35. Among the 151 women running for office as district and city representatives, 17.5 per cent fell within this age group.¹⁵ In 24 districts in the Central Region, young candidates managed to win 80 per cent of the offices up for re-election, in many instances prevailing over veteran incumbents.¹⁶ The hope is that they will do a better job of representing the interests of their own demographic group. Of course, there are no guarantees.



From Theoretical to More Concrete Support for Youth

While Western countries need to keep an eye on these developments, they should not wait until African countries simply demonstrate more political will on their own. A poll conducted by Afrobarometer in 18 African countries among people between the ages of 15 and 35 revealed that 64 per cent of those surveyed were very dissatisfied with development in their countries. Relying on the countries' political stability over the next ten years is a gamble. Migration pressure will persist and continue to grow.¹⁷

Africa's future, both in terms of the economic development and political direction of the continent, depends on its youth. There are a number of options for promoting the younger generation. These include support for universities and training programmes geared towards administration in African states, as well as more internships and entry-level career opportunities with local

offices of Western development and cooperation organisations. Learning about structures, organisation, and fixed workflows is often more sustainable than a well-intentioned climate programme.

French President Emmanuel Macron quite rightly made youth one of the fixed variables of his Africa policy, an approach he launched with his 2017 speech at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. Many representatives of Africa's youth were present at the Africa-France summit on 8 October 2021.¹⁸ Macron once again demonstrated that he sees and recognises young people as important development partners alongside the states' executive organs. Likewise, the EU is placing greater emphasis on youth in its relations with the AU, having staged an Africa-Europe Youth Summit in the run-up to the 2017 AU-EU Summit in Abidjan.

For many years, the United States has also been running sponsorship programmes for elite young

Africans. An example of this is the Mandela Washington Fellowship Program created within the US State Department by former US President Barack Obama in 2014. With some 4,500 alumni¹⁹ to date, the programme has established major networks between participants and the United States – these networks are now self-sustaining. After completing the programme, many fellows return to their home countries, where they work for American organisations.

Following these examples would be a positive step for the German Federal Government. An official seat could be granted for youth at the next German Africa summit for heads of state and government in Berlin. Another conceivable option would be programmes affiliated with the Chancellor's Office that would provide networking and exchange opportunities for young African elites and foster ties to Germany. The time for this is now.

– translated from German –

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