



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

# Old Rulers, Young People

Nigeria's Youth Excluded from Political Participation

Vladimir Kreck

Nigerian society is deeply divided. A large majority of young people is faced with an old political elite that clings to power. Gerontocracy is not only culturally conditioned, but also protected by law. Sharing power is not an option for the established ruling elite.

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Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with over 200 million inhabitants, has a very young population. Over 60 per cent of people are below 24 years old; the average age is 18.1 years, with young people thus forming the majority. Nigeria has experienced many military dictatorships since its independence in 1960, and has only had an uninterrupted democratic constitution since 1999. The history of independent Nigeria produced a series of young dictators. General Yakubu Gowon was 31 years old when he became head of state in 1966. Subsequent military rulers, such as Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo, had not yet reached the age of 40 when they took power.

Today, in a democratically constituted Nigeria, we look in vain for young people to help shape the political destiny of their country. For almost two decades, Nigeria has been ruled by a political caste that is characterised above all by elite continuity. Muhammadu Buhari, the 78-year-old former general and the country's current president, exemplifies this. He already held the reins of government as head of the junta from 1983 to 1985. His 44-member cabinet, which had an average age of 61<sup>1</sup> in March 2021, includes many ministers who already held high political office in previous legislative periods or under the military dictator Sani Abacha in the 1990s. Representation of Nigerian youth is no better in Parliament either. The average age in the House of Representatives was 55.7 when MPs were sworn in in 2019.<sup>2</sup> And the Senate, for which no data is available but where many ex-governors and ex-ministers traditionally sit, is popularly mocked as the retirement home of ageing elites.

### **Young People Are Excluded by Law from Public Office**

In Nigeria, people aged 18 and above are eligible to vote. The young are not apolitical, either. There are many who are interested in politics, and who want to get involved and to be part of the decision-making process. But most of them already fail due to the legal hurdles. This is because the constitution, adopted in 1999, sets age thresholds for candidates who want to stand for election to the highest political offices. The minimum age to run in gubernatorial or senatorial elections is 35. Until two years ago, the minimum age for running for the house of representatives, or for one of the 36 regional parliaments, was 30; the minimum age for running for the presidency, and thus for running the government, was 40.

Only under great pressure from civil society, and following a two-year campaign called "Not Too Young To Run", were youth organisations able to convince the national assembly and the president to reform the constitution in 2018. This constitutional reform came into force before the last presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. Today, anyone who is at least 25 years old can run for a seat in the House of Representatives and in a regional parliament. The minimum age for a presidential candidacy has been reduced from 40 to 35. However, the minimum age has not been changed for the Senate or for gubernatorial elections.

Academics say that lowering age limits for political office can have a positive effect on young people's political engagement. Mona Krook and Mary Nugent, for example, state "lower age limits have immediate and longer-term

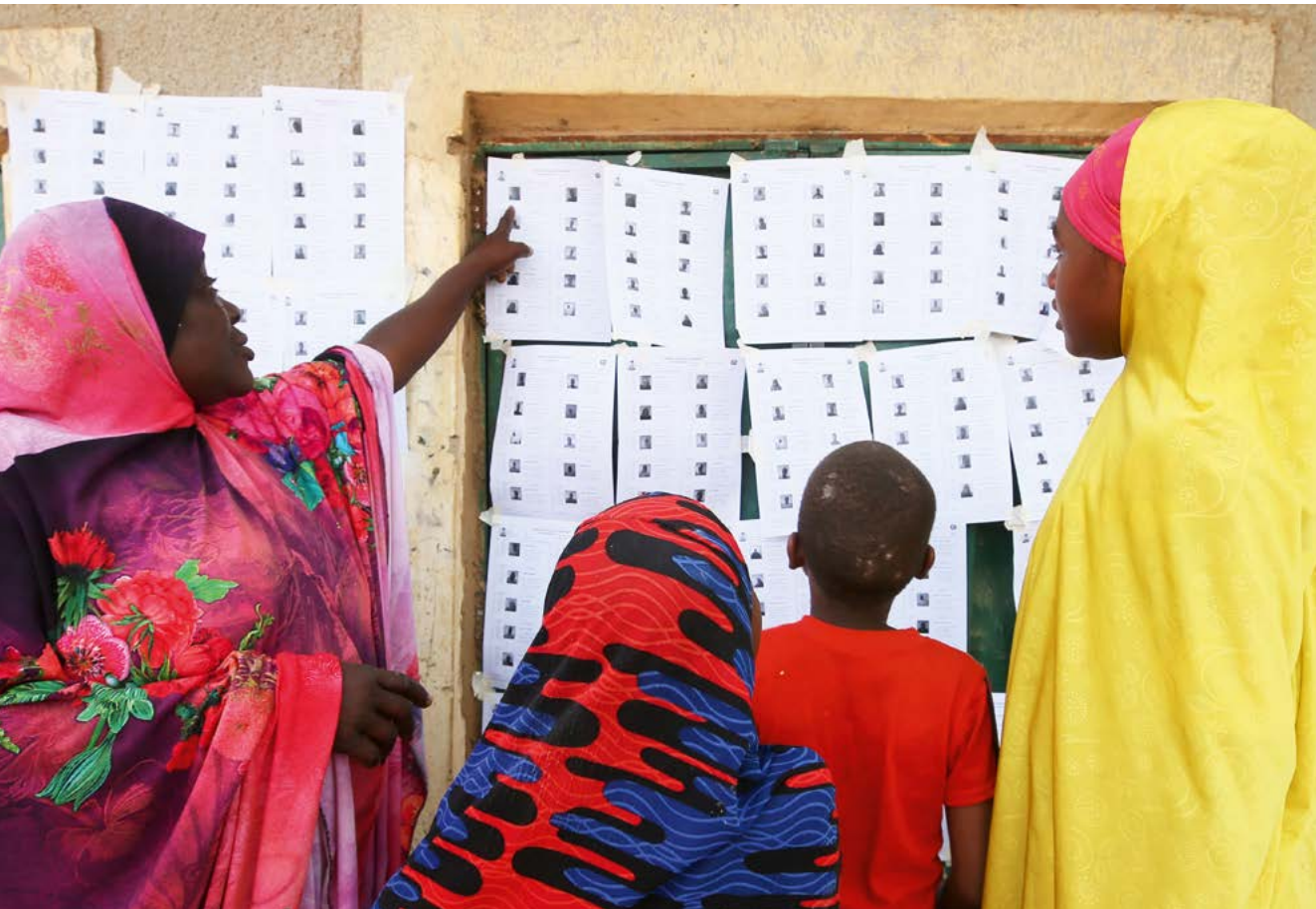
‘mobilising effects’, shifting the calculations of potential candidates in terms of the age at which they first decide to run for office”.<sup>3</sup> Relevant analyses of the latest Nigerian presidential and parliamentary elections confirm this assumption; for instance, 14 per cent of the presidential candidates were between 35 and 40 years old.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of young people among the candidates also increased significantly in the elections for the House of Representatives and for the regional parliaments.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, however, the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2019 were largely unsuccessful for young candidates. For example, no candidate under the age of 30 was able to win a seat in the House of Representatives.

Furthermore, only 13 MPs were aged between 30 and 35 when they took office. With 360 available seats, their share is only 3.7 per cent. At the regional level, at least 22 candidates between the ages of 25 and 30 succeeded in entering Parliament. However, this accounts for only 2.2 per cent of the 991 seats available nationwide. Another 68 MPs at the regional level, or 6.7 per cent of all MPs, were between 31 and 35 years old when they took office.<sup>6</sup>

### Cultural Hurdles in the Political Arena

The legal barriers that exclude young people from political office in Nigeria are, first and foremost, an expression of the seniority principle, which is still deeply rooted across all ethnicities



Voters in front of a list of candidates in the 2019 presidential election: The proportion of young candidates for political office has increased slightly as of late, but the actual success of these candidates remains limited. Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.

and religions in Nigeria. According to this principle, only older people are considered to have the necessary level of knowledge and experience for making important political decisions. Young people, on the other hand, are assumed to be too immature and inexperienced to participate responsibly in political decision-making processes. The enforcement of the seniority principle in Nigeria goes far beyond these stereotypes. Already in the family, then at school, and later at university, young people are raised to accept the old tradition of gerontocracy. They learn that a claim to power and dominance only comes with advanced age, and that they must therefore be subordinate to their elders.

### **The bourgeois elite was responsible for setting the high age limits for political office so as to secure its claim to power against younger competition.**

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This concept of social hierarchy continues in professional life. Here, older people among equals are promoted first, and, where this principle is violated, it is considered that older people should retire, or be transferred. The reason for the latter is that older people are thought to be unwilling to be subordinate to those younger than themselves. To avoid conflict, it is thus necessary for them to retire, or be transferred. A recent case in Nigeria that attracted special attention in this regard was the appointment of General Farouk Yahaya as Chief of Army Staff. The 55-year-old Yahaya was surprisingly appointed by the president in May 2021 to succeed General Ibrahim Attahiru, who had died shortly before. The day after his appointment, the Nigerian press was already speculating about the number of generals of equal or higher rank who would have to retire because of their age. After all, they noted, this is a tradition in the armed forces. It is now clear that at least 29 generals are to retire.<sup>7</sup>

### **Securing Power through Exclusion**

In Nigeria, the constitutional exclusion of young people from the highest political offices must be evaluated against a second background. The democratic transition process in 1998 and 1999 was also partly the responsibility of a bourgeois elite that had been denied political office for a long time, and which has shown little willingness to share power since the democratisation of the country in 1999.

Its rise was initially prevented by the military dictators Muhammadu Buhari from 1983 to 1985, and Ibrahim Babangida from 1985 to 1993. A tragic event in the memory of this elite was the failed presidential election in 1993. This election was supposed to usher in a new democratic era following ten years of military rule. The bourgeois elite rallied around Moshood Abiola, the Social Democratic presidential candidate. He won the election, but it was annulled by the military. In the same year, General Sani Abacha was able to seize power and establish a police state. It was only when Abacha died unexpectedly in 1998 that the bourgeois elite, which had failed to benefit from the 1993 elections, saw a new opportunity to come to power through democratic elections. It was also responsible for setting in constitutional law the high age thresholds for political office. This primarily served to secure the elite's claim to power – not only in the first presidential and parliamentary elections in 1999, but for two decades – against the up-and-coming, younger competition.

It then fits that Nigeria's two major parties have not yet made any serious efforts to produce self-organised and opinionated youth associations close to the party, which could serve as a platform for young politicians. The first ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which managed to stay in power uninterrupted from 1999 to 2015, and which has been by far the largest opposition in the national assembly since 2015, recruited its functional elite from the bourgeois camp that was denied the possibility to take power by democratic means in 1993. It was not in the interest of this elite to

share power with younger generations, or to extend intra-party competition for positions and offices to younger people.

In turn, the current ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), emerged in 2013 from an alliance of opposition parties that were unable to prevail against the PDP until the 2015 elections. Its functional elite originates from the same bourgeois camp foiled by the annulled 1993 election. It also benefited from a large number of defections of politicians who had not made it in the PDP for many years.

## The winner of an election is often the one who can raise the most money.

### Financial Barriers to Political Participation

Transfers from one party to another are typical in Nigerian politics. These defections usually take place in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections. Such shifts should be understood in light of the fact that parties in Nigeria are hardly distinguishable from each other, ideologically. Parties are described as “platforms” with which to win political office. Party manifestos, on the other hand, are of little importance, and are not the reason why someone decides to join or leave one party in favour of another. It is usually about any personal advantage that can result from party membership. Again, this has a lot to do with the understanding of the state and politics in Nigeria. Many Nigerians share the view that a political mandate is the quickest way to wealth. This refers less to the comparatively lavish salaries that are reported to come with ministerial and gubernatorial posts or seats in Parliament in Nigeria, but above all to the opportunity to enrich oneself with state funds. For decades, the country has suffered from endemic corruption, which is also so lucrative because Nigeria is one of the largest oil exporters in the world, and large parts of the state budget are financed by oil

revenues.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the ranking of the most corrupt countries in the world, published by Transparency International, Nigeria has long ranked in the bottom (most corrupt) third. In 2020, it ranked 149 out of 180, together with countries such as Iran and Cameroon.<sup>9</sup>

The monetary incentives that come with political office result in two things: first, patronage, nepotism, cronyism, and dependency relationships play a crucial role when nominating candidates for political office. The decision on a nomination is often made in the background by party giants who have a lot of money and can protect a candidate. This is helpful insofar as nominations often have to be bought by bribing party delegates. Second, in a relative majority electoral system, election campaigns are fought relentlessly and elections are often decided by electoral fraud in the form of vote buying. The decisive principle here is *the winner takes it all*. The winner of an election is then often the one who can raise the most money.

So, money ultimately determines the political participation of individuals in a country whose predominantly young population is among the poorest in the world. At the end of 2020, 51 per cent of people in Nigeria were estimated to be living in extreme poverty.<sup>10</sup> High unemployment and the slide into the informal sector mean that many people live from hand to mouth. In turn, only a few are sufficiently socio-economically privileged that they can afford to bid with others for political office.

### Great Hope, Great Disappointment

There was great euphoria, especially among young people in Nigeria, when Muhammadu Buhari was elected president in 2015. Despite his already advanced age, many associated him with the hope of a better future. Buhari was considered to have integrity. After all, he was said not to have enriched himself from the state coffers as head of the junta in the 1980s. And Buhari and his party, the APC, promised change after 16 years of PDP rule. The terrorist militia group Boko Haram was to be defeated in just a

few months. The weakening economy was to recover within a short period of time, and young people in particular were to be given new opportunities. Buhari also announced that he would take consistent action against the endemic corruption, including among the political elites. For this reason in particular, he achieved something with the APC in 2015 that had never been achieved before in Nigeria, and only rarely elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa – a democratically legitimised, peaceful transfer of power from one party to another.

### **The electorate could either give their vote to an old man who had disappointed them for four years or to his equally ageing opponent who was tainted with allegations of corruption.**

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However, when Buhari ran for re-election in 2019, not much was left of the former euphoria. Living conditions in the country had not improved; instead, they had deteriorated. Meanwhile, 48 per cent of the population was living in extreme poverty. Unemployment and underemployment had reached a new peak of 42 per cent. In addition, around 40 per cent of the population was still not connected to the electricity grid. The country's roads remained dilapidated. Corruption among the political elite had not noticeably decreased. Boko Haram had not been defeated, and rising violent crime was spreading throughout the country.

Under Buhari, the prospects of young people in particular had deteriorated significantly. In the latest Global Youth Development Index and Report, published in 2020, and comparing survey results from 2016 and 2019, Nigeria ranked 161 out of 181 countries surveyed.<sup>11</sup> This means the country has slipped 20 places in just three years. The study gave the national education system a particularly poor report. Only about 60 per cent of people under 25 are said to have

a minimum level of literacy. Around 30 per cent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 neither attend school, nor have an apprenticeship or job.

The fact that Buhari and the APC were nevertheless able to win the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019 may not have been due so much to alleged electoral fraud, but rather to the PDP's frontrunner for the presidency. The largest opposition party had nominated 72-year-old Atiku Abubakar, a former senior customs official, who had gained wealth with businesses in the logistics and oil sectors, and had already co-ruled the country as vice president from 1999 to 2007. During the election campaign, however, Atiku was troubled by old corruption allegations. As vice president, he is said to have enriched himself in the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The predominantly young electorate was thus faced with a dilemma. They could either vote for an old man who had disappointed them for four years, or for his opponent who was just as old and could not get rid of the corruption allegations. What the country actually needed was a new, fresh candidate in this presidential election – someone who would have stood credibly for a future-oriented Nigeria. But the old-established elites of the country's two largest parties continued to cling to power.

### **Alternative Forms of Political Participation**

Young people in Nigeria are ultimately forced to resort to situational, issue-based political activities. These activities are often protest-oriented, and mainly take place on social media. Indeed, over the last two decades, it has been rare for young people to gather on the cities' streets for demonstrations. One of the few exceptions was the EndSARS protests in October 2020. Thousands of young people protested peacefully against police violence for three weeks, mainly in the country's Christian south, in the metropolis of Lagos, and the capital Abuja.

The impetus for the protests came from a viral video, which suggested that police forces of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad had

beaten a young Nigerian man to death in the open street and stolen his car. The squad, known as SARS for short, has been accused of serious crimes against humanity for years. Its members were allegedly guilty of kidnapping, extortion and torture, as well as robbery and murder. Amnesty International had published a report on this just a few months before the protests. It documented at least 82 cases of serious human rights violations, allegedly committed by the special unit over a period of three years. Most of the victims are said to have been between the ages of 18 and 30.<sup>12</sup>

### **The youth was demonstrating against police violence, poor governance, corruption, patronage, and nepotism.**

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Political leaders had known about the allegations against the special unit for many years, but they had done nothing. The youth now took their protest to the streets under the hashtag #EndSARS with a force and tenacity that surprised the government. Even when the president gave in to the pressure and ordered the disbandment of the special unit, the protests continued. The youth were no longer demonstrating against police violence only, but now also against poor governance, corruption, patronage, and nepotism among the political elites.

It was not long before images of peaceful demonstrators alternated with images of burning police stations and groups of young men marching through the streets armed with sticks and machetes. Accusations quickly arose on social media that the secret service was organising the violence in the background to give the security forces a reason to use violence against the peaceful EndSARS movement. On the night of 20 to 21 October, the protests came to an abrupt end. Army personnel and police fired live ammunition at peaceful demonstrators in Lagos. According to Amnesty International, twelve people were killed and many injured.<sup>13</sup> In

November 2021, an independent commission of inquiry set up by the government of Lagos State determined that the armed forces and police had committed acts that could “be described as a massacre”.<sup>14</sup>

### **Maintaining Power through Repressive Measures**

The incident in Lagos must be seen as a repressive intervention in the rights of young people, with which the country’s ruling elite wanted to assert its claim to power. The message to Nigeria’s youth was that they should not rebel against the established ruling structures. The government further reinforced this message in the months that followed. It cracked down on the predominantly young, internet-savvy supporters of the peaceful protests by blocking bank accounts and preventing them from leaving the country. Since June 2021, Twitter has also been blocked in Nigeria. This was the main medium through which the youth organised their protest, and through which they received international encouragement. The then presidential candidate and current US President Joe Biden, former US President Bill Clinton, international pop stars, football players from top European clubs, and, last but not least, Twitter founder Jack Dorsey tweeted their solidarity with the protest movement. Even then, Nigerian government officials sharply criticised the role of Twitter. When Twitter deleted a message from Buhari in June 2021, in which he threatened an ethnic section of the population with violence, the government took this as an opportunity to remove the service from the national network. In early October 2021, the president held out the prospect that the Twitter block could be lifted if a number of conditions were met, such as ensuring that it was only available to Nigerian users for business purposes and positive activities.<sup>15</sup>

Many in Nigeria see the blocking of Twitter as a threat to freedom of expression, also in light of the fact that journalists are increasingly prevented by state authorities from reporting freely. In the Reporters Without Borders ranking, the country has fallen eight places since

Buhari came to power, and is now ranked 120 out of 180. The organisation judges the working conditions of the press as particularly bad. Journalists have to fear intimidation, summons, arrest, interrogation, and ill-treatment if they report critically on the work of the government.<sup>16</sup> To make matters worse, since Buhari came to power, bills have been debated in both houses of the national assembly for further severe restrictions on the use of social media, or at least to have it controlled by the state. A national identification number, introduced by the state in December 2020, is also considered a prerequisite for obtaining a private mobile phone contract. Experts and journalists see this state-organised registration as a government instrument to monitor the population's information flows in the future.

### Poor Prospects for Young People in Nigeria

Most recently, since the violent culmination of the EndSARS protests, it has become more than obvious that Nigerian society is deeply divided. Young people, and thus the majority of the population, are confronted with an ageing functional elite that stands for an encrusted political system riddled with corruption. The modern, globally-minded, and internet-savvy youth in Lagos no longer feels represented by this political elite. But in the rest of the country, too, the discontent among young people is probably high in view of the rampant lack of work and prospects. The Africa Polling Institute recently published a study showing that only 26 per cent of the population still trusts Buhari's government.<sup>17</sup>

According to the same study, 73 per cent of the respondents would now like to leave the country if given the chance.<sup>18</sup> Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU was considered an attractive destination for Nigerian migrants. For many years, there were more Nigerian asylum applications in the EU than from any other African country. There were 25,000 in 2018, for example. In Germany, Nigeria also often ranked among the top five countries of origin.<sup>19</sup> The border closures on both continents that accompanied

the pandemic have slowed the migration movement towards Europe. But with border openings resuming, migrants from Nigeria are likely to seek entry to the EU again soon, and then probably in even greater numbers.

Many Nigerians are now looking to the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023 with dampened hopes. Will they possibly produce a government that can spark a spirit of optimism? The chances of that are slim. The battles between the Diadochi have long since begun among the established functional elites in both major parties, from which the candidates will emerge. Smaller parties, on the other hand, are not expected to succeed in the elections, since they will lack the requisite resources to win elections in Nigeria.

### The potential for violence will not diminish, but rather increase as poverty and population size grow.

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So, the big question remains about the medium- to long-term prospects for young people in Nigeria. These do not look good; the economic growth that creates jobs is not expected any time soon. For far too long, governments have relied on the job-poor but long-lucrative oil industry, and have failed to diversify the economy. In the meantime, the international oil market is weakening, and the Nigerian state's revenues have fallen sharply. To make matters worse, the country's population is growing rapidly due to a high birth rate. The UN predicted years ago that Nigeria will have over 400 million people by 2050. By then, the country is expected to overtake the US, and have the third largest population worldwide behind China and India. To keep up with this development, the country's economy would have to show double-digit growth figures.

The EndSARS protests may have foreshadowed what the country has to brace itself for. After





the shooting in Lagos, a state of emergency prevailed across the country. Large gatherings of young men engaged in looting and vandalism, and threatened the lives of others. The police were overwhelmed and the army had to be called out. This potential for violence and destruction will not diminish, but rather

increase as poverty and population size grow. Social unrest might then break out at given moments in waves, and at ever shorter intervals. However, the EndSARS protests, which took place almost exclusively in the Christian south of the country, have also shown one thing. It is unlikely that a large, nationwide youth



Remembering the violence: Young people take to the streets again one year after the EndSARS protests against police brutality, which were brought to a bloody end by the government. [Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.](#)

movement will emerge to rebel against the existing power relations. The youth in Nigeria is too ethnically, religiously, and socially divided for that. Many of the approximately 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria do not live peacefully with each other. The distrust between Christians and Muslims, who each make up about 50 per cent of the population and divide the country into the north and south, is rather high on both sides. And the young, internet-savvy, well-educated segment of the population in Lagos that organised the peaceful EndSARS protests is a small minority among young people in Nigeria. The vast majority of them are less well educated, and live in poverty.

*- translated from German -*

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