E-GOVERNANCE, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE NIGERIAN YOUTH: EXPLORING THE NEXUS AND DEPTH

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ABSTRACT

Citizen participation in decision-making brings about sense of belonging and effective service delivery. It can be arguably said that Nigeria runs exclusive governance that basically alienates the vast majority of the populace from the processes of policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. The youth constitute the critical mass of this segment. This essay, therefore, seeks to examine how the Nigerian Youth have been able to explore the opportunities provided by the social media/ICTs to meaningfully engage the government on issues that affect them. Attempt will be made to identify factors that may inhibit maximal use of the potential offered by these new technologies.

Keywords: Youth, Governance, Participation, Social Media,

INTRODUCTION

Since its advent some two centuries ago, modern-day political democracy has dramatically changed its institutional and social outlook. Initially, it rested on a comparably small set of institutions, clearly structured into legislative, executive and judicial branches, and typically organised at the level of the nation state without significant regional or local differentiation. Issues considered politically relevant and therefore requiring state intervention were few, and related to the major issues of internal order, external defence and fiscal stability. Political decision making was based on a narrow social stratum, usually consisting of bourgeois and aristocratic notables, while broad sections of society were excluded. In short, politics at this early stage was – as far as institutional arrangements, issues addressed and people involved in its shaping were concerned – a remote affair for society at large. Gradually throughout the nineteenth century, and at an accelerated pace during the twentieth century, this distance between politics and society closed (Forbrig, 2005:9).

Most theories of democracy talk of the need for informed and aware citizens who can participate in democratic life, hold the state to account and exercise their rights and responsibilities effectively (Development Research Centre, 2010:7). Democracy as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive offices. Yet, increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth (Fung and Wright, 2001:5). The advent of the information age and its acceleration effect on

globalization are leading the world to a new economic order driven by information and knowledge based economies. In an increasingly globalized world, where information technology has become one of the key determinants of growth, many African countries are facing new challenges as a result of the emerging information age. Governments in recent years have primarily focused on improving citizen e-services rather than organizing government agency functions and services. An emerging focus is to link tools of ICT to the consolidation of back-end systems and processes in order to improve the seamlessness and the quality of service delivery and free up resources for additional service innovation(OECD, 2007 cited in UN, 2008:xv). Though many of these new arrangements are enabled by ICTs, they also require deeper cultural and management changes, including often reengineering in the way a government functions.

ICT is increasingly being used in a variety of different ways to influence policy, both directly and indirectly. E-government interaction is traditionally defined as government-to-government (G2G), government-to-citizen (G2C) and government-to-business (G2B). However, innovative, pro-active, bottom-up, grassroots-led approaches are being tried in some countries to force governments to engage with their citizens (Ahmed, 2006:12). Historically, the participation of citizens in the political process has been considered a crucial element for a functioning and healthy democracy. Irrespective of the various changes in the social and political landscape on both international and national levels during the last decades, the significance of participatory behavior of citizens is at the core in several key works on democracy. In the light of this alleged importance, serious concerns have been raised over the rate of political participation among young and future generations.

Many countries have adopted a variety of techniques and fora that invite citizens to participate in policy-making: local councils, participatory consultations and participatory budgeting processes. Such fora have huge potential to engage citizens in debates about public policy from local to national level and in a range of sectors. Central to this development is the effect of e-participation on governance which can no longer be underestimated if regular and productive contact is to be maintained between the citizens and public office holders. Citizen participation in decision-making brings about sense of belonging and effective service delivery. It can be arguably said that Nigeria runs exclusive governance that basically alienates the vast majority of the populace from the processes of policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. The youth constitute the critical mass of this segment. This essay, therefore, seeks to examine how the Nigerian Youth have been able to explore the opportunities provided by the social media/ICTs to meaningfully engage the government on issues that affect them. Attempt will be made to identify factors that may inhibit maximal use of the potential offered by these new technologies.

Theorising Participatory Governance, E-government and ICTs

Participation is not a static concept but has been recurring and changing with developments in social theory and research. The varying practices of civic engagement have also affected the ways in which participation has been understood and conceptualised. One of the channels for elaborating the concept has been the broader theory of democracy and governance. Classic political concepts postulate participation as an integral part of a democratic system of governance. In the abundant literature on democracy there tend to be two basic understandings of citizen participation: a narrow and a broader understanding. The former limits civic participation to voting (Schumpeter 1952) and the latter provides a more substantial definition of the term (Linz 1975 cited in Kovacheva, 2005:20), linking it to a

broader range of citizens' involvement in politics. There are three main forms of participation: (1) economic participation that provides people, including women, the disabled, and marginalized groups, with opportunities to use their capabilities and gain income to increase their choices; (2) political participation, which includes freedom of speech and association, guarantees of human rights, free and fair elections, a multi-party system, and the rule of law; and (3) social and cultural participation, which implies the rights of all people and their communities to shape their own social and cultural environment, including language, art, and music. These forms are complementary – progress in one can positively affect progress in the other (Cheema, 2007:49). Some believe that e-participation in government policy-making could help revitalize this type of dialogue between citizens and communities and promote greater participation by disenfranchised citizens and groups as they educate each other about political issues through on-line communication. Whether this would lead to greater opportunities for true deliberation on political issues and not just add to the prolific exchange of conversation on the internet, however, is a more difficult question (Romsdahl, 2005:2).

The concept of "governance" is as old as human civilization. In essence, the term "governance" refers to the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). The word "governance" can be used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. If we define governance as a process of decision-making involving multiple entities, study on governance would refer to a thorough analysis of the actors and structures involved in this decision and implementation process (Kitwa, 2006:8). Although governance is one fabric, for the sake of analysis and entry points for action, it can be divided into three dimensions. Political governance means the range of processes through which a society reaches consensus and implements regulations, human rights, laws, and policies. Economic governance is the architecture for national and international economic activities, including processes to manage the production of goods and services and to marshal and protect natural, fiscal and human resources. Social governance is the set of norms, values, and beliefs that guide society's decisions and behaviours. Each dimension of governance affects and interacts with the other two dimensions (Cheema, 2007:31).

According to UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (cited in Powley, Elizabeth and Anderlini, :36), the following characterise a good system of governance: participatory-encouraging wide citizen participation in decision-making; consensus-orientated-attempting to reach decisions based on widespread agreement; transparent-being open to scrutiny in decision making processes; responsive-listening and responding to the needs of its citizens; effective and efficient-providing basic services; and equitable and inclusive-not excluding sectors of the population, especially those that are more vulnerable or marginalized. As observed by Rizvi (2007:86): The search for better governance was driven primarily by the concern that governments were ineffective, expensive, inflexible, and insufficiently responsive to the needs of citizens…The introduction of technology has been piecemeal and slow; and it has not been easy in societies where the availability of funds for technological change is minimal. Governments cater to all citizens and in most countries vast majorities of the people are not yet wired to the Internet. Hence, the governments have to maintain – at least for the interim period – both the traditional methods of facilitation and the progressive ICT options for delivering government services. Participatory governance's rationale is either to bind organized constituencies to agreed policy outcomes or to offer voice to the voiceless. While the two are not mutually exclusive, it is important to recognize the distinction not only in the interests of enhanced understanding

but because, if it is not maintained, attempts to evaluate participatory governance mechanisms are impaired – either because organized interests are judged by whether they extend voice or engagement with organized groups is meant to broaden voice. Neither effective governance nor enhanced voice is served by the conflation (Friedman, 2006:6). The United Nations has taken a leading role in re conceptualizing governance. In the UN's paradigm, governance is defined as "the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a nation's affairs. It is the complex mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences"(UNDP,1997:9). Social media does not only empower the students of the world through accessible information, it also empowers them through the right to production of knowledge. In the network society, through social media, everyone has the possibility to put out information, create knowledge and highlight relevant issues. The power of production has thus shifted from media corporations, or political and economic agendas, to the people. Viewed through the lenses of the participatory paradigm, this increases the chances for social change considerably, as people become the agents of their own society (Peisker, 2011:19). Tettey (2008:10) avers that the ability of the internet to allow for subjective narratives of history is significant enough; but its capacity to bring alive images that are ubiquitous, accessible to a myriad of people, (re)generate passions, contest particular versions of history, and mobilize transnational constituencies for the purpose of holding governments and various actors accountable for their actions, make it a very powerful tool for democratic expression.

With regard to the Youth, Joerg Forbrig (2005:7-8) contends that political participation addresses all possible forms of youth involvement in the structures and processes of democratic decision making. It thus relates to the input of young people, individually or collectively, to democratic politics. This input is clearly conditioned by the extent to which democratic institutions are open to the concerns, interests and involvement of young people, whose participation will largely depend on whether or not they see their voice sufficiently reflected in the political process and its outcomes. In turn, democracy also places a more general demand on young people to accept, comprehend and develop democratic institutions through their own participation, even if issues, processes and outcomes are not always to their liking and of immediate interest. Hence, youth political participation requires permanent accessibility on the part of institutions but also sustained engagement on the part of young people.

Political action is also not only the action structured through political institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but also involvement in less structured, looser networks and friendship circles, and even individual action, such as political consumerism. Inglehart, 1997(cited inKovacheva, 2005:27) points to the preference of younger generations for participation in loose, less hierarchical informal networks and various lifestyle-related sporadic mobilisation efforts. Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2003(cited in Kovacheva, 2005:27) also stress young people's inclination to participate in less bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations or to pursue individualistic and unconventional action, such as political consumerism. The Internet has become another innovative resource for youth participation. Until now it has been used mostly in advancing both traditional and unconventional forms of participation and new social movements: E-mail lobbying, networking, mobilising, raising funds, recruiting supporters, communicating their message to the public. However, it is too early yet to predict what alternative avenues for political expression this resource is giving to young people. The right to participate in politics is an essential element of democratic governance because it provides the people the voluntary

activities through which they can share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy (Mcclosky, 1972:11). It is a fundamental principle of democracy that participation includes engagement in acts of representative democracy. According to the broad definition offered by Macintosh (cited in Medimorec, 2011:7), e-participation is the usage of ICT in order to enhance and deepen the political participation of citizens. The use of electronic technology in all public activities and societal processes, including participation in political opinion shaping, decision-making and the provision of public services ("e-services") is able to strengthen constitutional principles and public engagement by individual citizens as well as interest groups. Ideally, this increased level of interaction between citizens and politicians can strengthen democracy (Medimorec et al, 2011:7). Simply defined, E-Government is the use of ICT to promote more efficient and effective government, facilitate the accessibility of government services, allow greater public access to information, and make governments more accountable to citizens (Kitaw, 2006:7).

E-Governance goes beyond E-Government. It means employing modern ICTs to address the issues of governance i.e. the participation in the decision processes of citizens and other actors. This inter-alia implies deploying efforts in the participation of all citizens, the access-divide and promotes opportunities for social empowerment (ibid:8).Information and Communication Technologies have raised citizens' expectations of their government. Citizens now expect to be directly involved in designing government programmes and services. At the various stages of the policy process, from elections to policy planning and implementation, citizens are becoming increasingly involved, through various participatory tools, such as focus groups, design sessions, hands-on testing and e-participation tools. E-participation is one tool that enables governments to dialogue with their citizens. By enhancing government's ability to request, receive and incorporate feedback from constituents, policy measures can be better tailored to meet the needs and priorities of citizens (United Nations, 2008:58).

Youth, Political Participation and Governance in Nigeria

Historically, the participation of citizens in the political process has been considered a crucial element for a functioning and healthy democracy. Irrespective of the various changes in the social and political landscape on both international and national levels during the last decades, the significance of participatory behavior of citizens is at the core in several key works on democracy (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011:3). In the light of this alleged importance, serious concerns have been raised over the rate of political participation among young and future generations. It has been affirmed thate-participation can mobilize citizens to engage with others within their society, express their needs and open up new ideas for responding to current challenges.

New forms of digital citizenship, particularly mobile technologies, have the potential to improve the commitment of stakeholders in the political process, reversing a trend towards disengagement, enabling better access to information and focusing services on those who need them most (PIWA and UNDP, 2009:11).While developing countries still experience, in varying degrees, major difficulties in accessing new technologies, the potential these new technologies offer has become a key aspect in the work of civil society organizations (CSOs), governments and the private sector. Governments use ICT for intra-governmental communication and for implementing services to inform and communicate with citizens, and also for promoting citizen participation in democratic processes and governance. For example, almost all African governments now have a website (PIWA and UNDP, 2009:16).

While advocating the need for what it calls Connected Governance, the United Nations (2008:8) notes that:

Often government policy formulation cuts across several agencies and departments. Connected governance allows for malleable organizational boundaries towards a holistic policy development and an integrated policy implementation…an integral part of successful e-government around the world implies the provision of an effective platform of e-participation. Citizen involvement in public policymaking is requiring governments to engage in multi-stakeholder citizen engagement. The notion of Good governance is located within the broad principles that all stakeholders' participation is required in Decision making and Governance. In most African Countries, Youth constitute a majority of electoral voters; however, the legislative parliaments have less than one (1) percent youth participation as MP's. Young people continue to be subdued and relegated to Youth wing of political parties and have been used as agents to amass political power(Sigudhla, 2005: 8)Elections are avenues through which youth and youth leagues can exploit to promote effective participation in political leadership. Youth leagues are likely to make nosignificant impact on the on-going democratization process and on people's lives if they can't be effective and represented in decision making bodies such as parliaments. In many countries, representation into decision making bodies has largely through electoral performance (Kanyadudi, 2010:25-26).

The concept of "participatory politics" refers to the involvement of all citizens in politics and policymaking. This requires a relationship between the government and society in which the participation of citizens and a plurality of views are encouraged. This can be supported by strengthening political parties; encouraging the participation of marginalised groups, such as women and youth; and by strengthening civil society (Powley and Anderlini, :38). The Internet is a natural medium for alternative and digital ways of political participation. It offers—potentially—new modes of easily accessible, low-cost forms of participation. The web and all other online applications are heavily used by younger people. For example, in 2007, the average level of Internet use1 in the 27 European Union member states was 60%, whereas this was 88% for the age group of 16 to 24, peaking at 99% in the Netherlands and 100% in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland (Eurostat, 2007 cited in Bakker and de Vreese, 2011:3). In the United States, younger people also belong to the group of heaviest Internet users. While in May 2008 the overall percentage of Internet users among the adult American population was 73%, this percentage was 90% for the age group 18 to 29 (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008).

The Internet offers a wide scope of possibilities to engage in political activities like visiting political blogs, researching political information, following online news, participating in forums, discussing politics by e-mail, or organizing electronic petitions. According to Ayokunle (cited in National Mirror, 2012), there are over 45 million young people in Nigeria. 90 percent of this population is not involved in decision-making process while 50 percent have access to one form of social media. One of the illusions identified by Momoh (2010) relates to the claim that generational shift amounts to change. *The key problem of Nigeria is not just generational but ideational* or it is not about paradigmatic but ideological shift. According to him, many of the youth who served in government from 1999 to date do not have ideas that are different from the leaders they served. Indeed many of them were appointed into government because their parents, uncles or godfathers lobbied for their appointment. Also, many of the youth movements, including student unions are up for sale to the highest bidder. They are no longer driven by idealism but materialism and opportunism. The greatest tragedy that has befallen Nigeria is that the most critical segment of its youth,

who constituted the fulcrum for change have shed their idealism, many of them have become political hirelings, using the platform of youth organisations to give Awards to politicians and business barons, they have become tools, surrogates and hangers on of the political elite. Some of them have become pure mainstream/status quo players. How can these youth be the agents of change? They themselves required to be changed. The Nigerian youth is both the greatest assets of the country as well as its daunting challenge. The youth represent the great potential that Nigeria is while equally presenting the depth of the challenge of breaking through the confines of underdevelopment. Accounting for almost 50% of the population, it brims over with energy and creativity. But a significant proportion of the Nigerian youth is misguided, demoralised and confused. Thus, we have experience high levels of youth deviance, manifesting in the form of violence and thuggery, rising levels of financial and economic crimes. Violence, cultism, fraud and other corrupt practices mark school culture in public and private schools. Many of the youth of today are not being equipped to sustain themselves economically and to contribute to the maintenance of family cohesiveness. Neither are they empowered to participate meaningfully in the community and social life (Aiyede, 2010:8).

The paradox of the Nigerian situation is that the Nigerian government subscribes to many international instruments on the desirability of popular participation in development. In spite of all these beautiful declarations, there is not much on ground to suggest that the Nigerian State is willing to allow for popular participation in government. What is difficult to understand is why a government that claims to be democratic would find it difficult to accommodate dissenting and divergent views in the management of common affairs (Adewumi, 2007:108-109).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United Nations (2008:17) affirms that for e-participation to be successful and to become the norm, governments need to create an environment that allows citizens to voice their views online and more importantly, to create a feedback mechanism which shows citizens that their views are taken seriously. This requires trust between citizens and their governments, as well as a robust infrastructure that allows citizens access to decision makers. Therefore, governments should create an enabling environment that allows their citizens to voice their views on political and social issues, and have their views taken into account with regard to the implementation of policies. An enabling environment should include a robust high-speed infrastructure that can accommodate the millions of potential users; a searchable archive of past debates and dialogues; a simple and effective frontend portal that allows for ease of use and privacy, and safeguards the confidentiality of a citizen's personal information; an integrated back office operation that makes government a seamless entity; and a feedback mechanism that invites citizens to express their views.

Once this foundation is in place, citizens will have greater opportunity to interact with their government. Greater interaction is likely to lead to better informed citizens who are empowered to play an active role in discussing issues that affect their day-to-day lives (ibid:68).Every society is defined by the strength of its youth. Young people are the most vulnerable members of society and often used as tools for violence. In Nigeria, about 40 million of the 150 million-person population is under the age 25, and the number of registered voters (18 years and above) in the country in 2006 was about 62 million. This means that if youth come together with one voice, they could be a powerful force for change. But as a group, young people face many challenges. First, most young people in Nigeria do

not vote. The excuse is that votes do not count. For youth to positively impact the political scene, they must first develop good leadership skills through leadership training. Also, young people must identify strongly with organizations that support democracy in order to get adequate support, whether legal or moral. In addition, youth must find ways to mobilize resources via civil society groups or international community foundations that are committed to supporting young people. Finally, young people must recognize that they are capable of being the first line of change to making democracy work in the country through consistent voting practices (CIPE, 2010).Increasing transparency through accessible, relevant, and accurate information is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to establish democratic governance. Having information helps citizens to identify what needs to be changed or improved. Citizens also need mechanisms through which they can effectuate change and hold government and government officials accountable on a regular basis. On the other hand, legislators and policymakers need mechanisms of acquiring and aggregating citizens' interests and preferences. In other words, decision-makers need comprehensive and up-to date information about what citizens need and want on a regular basis. Without such information, even the best intentioned law and policymakers may support laws and regulations that do not benefit the majority of citizens (CIPE, 2004:10).

CONCLUSION

Democracy connotes popular participation in the political process and since politics is about the allocation of national resources as well as the articulation and protection of group interests, for any political process to be worth the tag democratic, it must recognize and possibly accommodate all the diverse interest groups in the society. In this same context, for individuals and groups not to be short-changed in the scheme of things, they have to properly position themselves by contesting the democratic space with the dominant political groups either directly through the electoral process or indirectly by putting pressure on political office holders to live up to the responsibility of their offices (Adewumi, 2007:106).Governments may recognize that their goals cannot be achieved without organized private constituencies whose acquiescence to or active support for government objectives is essential. In an attempt to secure the required co-operation, they invite the representatives of these constituencies to join in making policy and overseeing its implementation. The implicit or explicit expectation is that the organizations invited to participate will support decisions to which they are party – and will be able to bind their constituents to agreements Friedman, S (2006:4). And this forms the rationale for participatory governance in a democratic society.

The second rationale for participatory governance, as implied in this essay, is that it broadens and deepens democracy by expanding the range of citizens engaged in making or influencing government decisions. A stated or an implied rationale is that democracy is, in essence, an expression of popular sovereignty in which all members of the political community are entitled to an equal say in public affairs. Voting is not a sufficient guarantor of participation because a vote for a particular party cannot be automatically interpreted as support for any of its policy positions - and so democracies are required to maximize opportunities for participation between elections. Here, participation is a means of giving voice, of hearing citizens who would otherwise be ignored. The intent is not primarily the instrumental desire to ensure that the government engages those whose collaboration it needs but the normative goal of broadening the range of citizens who participate in governance. It is, however, noted that "the promotion of e-participation in evolving democracies should be undertaken with caution in terms of managing expectations. Many developing countries are nascent or evolving democracies, and therefore have not experienced conventional democratic practices

that involve consultation with, and the active participation of, citizens. Under the circumstances, designing e-government programs will have to consider the limitations of technology in promoting participatory government unless the process of democratization is already underway" (Ahmed, 2006:10).Thus a fundamental condition for widespread participation in a good democracy is broad diffusion of basic education and literacy, and with it a modicum of knowledge about government and public affairs. Important again, as a supporting condition, is the political culture, which should value participation and the equal worth and dignity of all citizens. The latter implies as well tolerance of political and social differences, and thus acceptance by groups and individuals that others also have equal rights under law (Diamond and Morlino, 2004:24).

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