

The Role of the Youth in Shaping Ethnic and Religious Identity and Political Governance in Nigeria between 2000 – 2020

Journal of Management and
Social Sciences
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Abstract

Nigeria's rapidly expanding population has led to a substantial increase in its youth demographic, with individuals aged 15–35 accounting for over 30% of the total populace. This significant proportion positions youths as key actors in the country's political, social, and economic spheres. Ideally, such a youthful population should translate into a productive and innovative workforce capable of driving sustainable development. However, Nigeria remains plagued by persistent poverty, a disengaged labor force, and socioeconomic stagnation. The growing discontent and agitation among Nigerian youths reflect these systemic issues. In light of these challenges, this study explores the intersection of political governance and ethnic and religious identity, with particular focus on how these factors influence youth political participation. It investigates the socio-political dynamics shaping youth engagement in Nigeria, chronicles historical patterns of youth involvement in governance, identifies obstacles impeding their active participation, and proposes actionable strategies to address these gaps. The study adopts a historical research methodology, utilising oral interviews and the analysis of relevant literature and archival materials. Findings reveal that the marginalisation of youths in Nigeria's sociopolitical processes has significantly hindered national progress. Based on these insights, the paper advocates for the establishment of youth-centered policies and the deliberate integration of young people into the nation's political framework as a pathway to sustainable national development.

Keywords:

Youth participation, political governance, ethnic identity, religious identity, national development, Nigeria

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Introduction

Youth participation is indispensable to nation-building, as young people embody energy, enterprise, resilience, courage, vision, and ambition qualities essential to the growth and development of any nation-state. Nigeria, as the largest Black democracy in the world, is home to a dynamic and determined youth population, positioning the country for progress on multiple fronts. Yet, some of Nigeria's enduring challenges have been linked to youthful exuberance, most notably exemplified by Major Kaduna Chukwuma Nzeogwu and his fellow young officers during the first military coup in 1966 (Godwin Ushie, 2024). As Nigeria's population continues to rise, so does the number of youths. Currently, young people constitute more than 25% of the country's total population surpassing the entire populations of Ghana, London, and the Republic of Benin combined (Akinyetun, T. S., 2021). However, the potential benefits of this youthful majority have largely eluded Nigeria. Young people remain marginalized from the processes of governance, with minimal representation in political and leadership roles. This exclusion has left them disempowered and unable to challenge the structures that perpetuate their alienation.

A growing youth population, when properly harnessed, can lead to the development of a large, vibrant workforce. However, when neglected, it can become a source of social instability and economic liability. This reality underscores the urgent need for the Nigerian government to fully integrate youths into national affairs. As (Zohdy, 2017) notes, excluding youth from governance leads to severe societal consequences including lower voter turnout, loss of GDP, increased violence, extremism, crime, and overall instability. Too often, youths are treated not as stakeholders in governance but merely as passive recipients of its outcomes. This troubling pattern raises concerns about the future of Nigerian youth, who, despite their eagerness to contribute to national development, face a political environment that hinders their aspirations. Nigerian youths are willing and prepared to assume leadership roles, but they require an enabling and inclusive political platform. While they may appear politically passive at first glance, a deeper look reveals significant engagement albeit through informal and alternative channels. For instance, some youths have been co-opted into political manipulation and economic disruption, particularly in the oil-rich Niger Delta, where youth restiveness is well documented (Uwada Deborah, 2024).

Beyond the political sphere, Nigerian youths play a crucial role in the socio-economic landscape, often serving as defenders and promoters of religious and ethnic identities. Unfortunately, political elites have frequently exploited them, using religion to influence politics and vice versa. This is evident in the support of unqualified candidates based on religious or cultural affiliations. In their determination to secure electoral victories or personal gains, some youths engage in various social vices such as kidnapping, assault, armed robbery, arson, cybercrime (commonly referred to as "Yahoo Yahoo"),

and drug-related offenses (Johnson Samuel, 2024). Despite the evident enthusiasm of Nigerian youths to contribute to nation-building, numerous obstacles hinder their full participation. These include poverty, multidimensional discrimination, unemployment, educational barriers, and limited access to opportunities. Collectively, these factors continue to suppress youth involvement in politics and leadership, contributing to their underrepresentation across governance structures (Akinyetun, T. S., 2021).

Conceptual Clarifications

Youth

The definition of "youth" varies across countries. In The Gambia, it refers to individuals aged 17 to 35; in Zambia, 15 to 25; in Ghana, 18 to 40; in Botswana, 18 to 30; and in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, 18 to 35. The United Kingdom does not adopt the European Union's definition of youth (ages 15 to 25), but instead defines youth as individuals aged 18 to 19 in its national policy, while community and voluntary services extend the age limit to 25. In Nigeria, youth are officially defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 (Godwin Onuh Odeh, 2022).

Youth are neither children nor fully mature adults. Individuals within this age bracket represent the active labour force of any country due to their energy, potential, and influence. In Nigeria, youth make up more than 60% of the population. Recognising this, historical figures like Giuseppe Mazzini, an Italian writer and orator, encouraged youth to engage in nation-building and the unification of Italy. Similarly, Nigerian youth play a vital role in national development and must be given priority, adequately trained, and engaged in nation-building processes.

Political Participation

Political participation refers to the involvement of individuals in political activities, civic responsibilities, active citizenship, and policymaking. Despite its importance, youth political participation faces several barriers including lack of awareness, unemployment, social exclusion, and limited access to resources and tools. In developing democracies like Nigeria, there is a critical need for fresh ideas and transformative leadership to move beyond authoritarian legacies. This requires not only individual capacity development but also a supportive environment for institutions and organizations to foster inclusive political engagement. According to Mengistu (2017), the low level of youth participation in African politics has made many young people vulnerable to political manipulation and recruitment for violence against the state.

Political participation encompasses a broad spectrum from voting and contesting for office to civic engagement, demonstrations, community service, and digital advocacy. It also includes rights-based actions, youth empowerment, crowdsourcing, and policy input (Ngele, O. K., 2008). The evolving nature of political participation highlights the need for continuous research and policy reform to ensure inclusive governance.

Ethnicity

Like many complex social concepts, ethnicity lacks a single, universally accepted definition. While derived from the term “ethnic group,” ethnicity specifically arises in contexts where multiple ethnic identities coexist. To understand ethnicity, one must first understand ethnic groups, which are social formations defined by shared characteristics and community boundaries (Nnoli, 1978). In Nigeria, ethnicity significantly influences political behavior and leadership, often leading to biased decision-making, favouritism, and nepotism. Competition among ethnic groups for political and economic dominance frequently fuels inter-ethnic tension and violence (Ogoloma, 2012). Ethnicity can be understood as a social construct based on shared cultural practices, symbols, and identities (Osaghae, 1994). It creates a sense of belonging among members of a group, distinguishing them from others in society. Today, ethnicity continues to be a central theme in governance and development discourse, particularly in Africa, where it remains a key determinant in national politics and social relations.

Religion

Religion is widely considered one of the oldest human institutions, yet it remains one of the most difficult concepts to define. Theologians and social scientists have long debated its meaning, due in part to its deeply personal and multifaceted nature (Egwu, 2001). Sociologists typically view religion as a social institution, while anthropologists see it as a cultural expression. Theologians, however, regard religion as the foundation of civilization shaping values, behavior, creativity, and social organisation (Muazam, 2006, cited in Cinjel & Chujor, 2017). Religion can function as both a tool for empowerment and a means of control. Karl Marx famously described it as “the opium of the people,” highlighting its potential to pacify the masses. In the hands of ethical leaders, religion can inspire unity and human dignity; in contrast, when manipulated by unethical leaders, it can fuel extremism and oppression (Ogugua, 2015).

In Nigeria, Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions are the dominant faiths. These differing beliefs have sometimes led to religious conflicts, both locally and globally (Ilesanmi, 2014). Due to the rise in religious extremism, some scholars argue that religion should be separated

from governance to promote social development and national unity (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

Politics

The term “politics” originates from the Greek word *polis*, meaning “city-state,” and is inherently tied to governance. While scholars offer various definitions based on differing philosophical and ideological views, most agree that politics centers on the state, power, and the organisation of society (Appadorai, 2003). In Nigeria, the nation's political struggles can be traced to the legacy of military rule, which fostered a culture of authoritarianism, corruption, and poor leadership (Ibrahim, Z. M., 2023). Leaders have often prioritised personal gain over public service, leading to political instability and stalled development. The collapse of Nigeria's First and Second Republics was largely due to electoral fraud, corruption, and political violence (Ayeni, 1988). Today, the country's democratic system still grapples with internal party indiscipline, weak ideologies, ethnic favoritism, and the politicisation of the military (Barret, R. S., 2003). These issues continue to undermine the stability and development of Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Youths' Socio-Political Involvement, Initiatives, and Incorporation in Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal

Despite the widely held notion that youths are the future of any nation, Nigeria's history reveals a paradox: while various administrations have introduced youth-oriented programmes since independence, young people have remained largely excluded from actual decision-making processes. This contradiction exposes a pattern of tokenism rather than a genuine strategy to harness the potential of youth as critical agents of change.

Historically, Nigerian youths have played pivotal roles in national discourse and transformation. From the involvement of young military officers in shaping the political trajectory through the 1966 coup, to the vibrant student union movements of the 1970s and 1980s, youths have consistently demonstrated agency sometimes forceful, sometimes visionary. However, successive governments have largely responded to these efforts with policies that prioritise containment and welfare rather than empowerment and inclusion. For example, the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973 was a significant state effort to promote national integration. Yet, five decades later, the NYSC has struggled to transcend its symbolic function. While "corpors" are visible across rural and urban Nigeria, their involvement in governance or policy development is negligible. The NYSC,

like many government initiatives, positions youths as participants in national unity projects without providing a pathway to leadership or meaningful civic influence.

Similarly, programmes such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), SURE-P, and YOUWIN aimed to address youth unemployment through skill acquisition and entrepreneurship funding. However, these efforts have yielded mixed results due to poor coordination, inadequate monitoring, and limited scalability. Even the more recent N-Power initiative, despite being lauded as Africa's largest social investment scheme, has offered short-term relief rather than long-term empowerment. It underscores a recurring trend: government policies treat youth as economic dependents rather than partners in governance and development. These gaps have created a frustrating disconnect. On one hand, Nigerian youths are expected to be patriotic, disciplined, and nation-building focused. On the other hand, they are marginalised in the political space, underrepresented in formal institutions, and often used as tools during elections either as political thugs or foot soldiers of ethno-religious mobilisation. Youths are frequently co-opted by elites to amplify divisive identities rather than promote national cohesion.

Yet, the resilience and creativity of Nigerian youths continue to challenge these imposed limitations. From their dominance in the tech and creative industries to the pivotal role they played during the EndSARS movement, Nigerian youths have proven they can lead transformative change when given space. The EndSARS protests in 2020, largely driven by youth, signaled a shift from passive frustration to assertive political expression. It also exposed the repressive tendencies of the state, as the movement was met with brutal suppression rather than dialogue. Moreover, the passage of the **“Not Too Young to Run”** bill in 2018 lobbied for and championed by youth-led coalitions was a rare legislative success that attempted to lower barriers to youth political participation. Buhari signs “Not Too Young To Run” bill (Sani Tukur, 2018). However, in practice, structural and financial constraints continue to prevent many young aspirants from competing in elections dominated by older, wealthier political actors.

Clearly, the role of youths in Nigeria should not be limited to participation in government-created programmes. Their value lies not only in their numbers but in their energy, innovation, and drive to challenge the status quo. As such, the state must move beyond symbolic gestures and meaningfully integrate youths into governance structures through political appointments, elected offices, policy advisory councils, and active inclusion in budgeting and development planning.

The marginalisation of youth in Nigeria is not just a political oversight it is a strategic failure with national consequences. Without urgent reforms that prioritise youth empowerment and political inclusion, Nigeria risks losing the creative capital and democratic potential of a generation. A country with a youth majority cannot afford to treat its young people as an afterthought. Their

leadership must be cultivated, their voices amplified, and their roles institutionalised if the nation is to realise its development aspirations. Below is the critical analysis of each of the programmes:

1. National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

Intended Purpose:

The NYSC was established in 1973, aiming to foster national unity and integration among Nigerian youths, promote patriotism, and serve as a tool for nation-building. It was also meant to engage youths in community development, social services, and leadership training across Nigeria's diverse regions.

Critique:

Lack of meaningful integration: While NYSC had the noble goal of fostering national unity, it has largely failed to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by youths. The programme requires corps members to serve in places often far from their homes, where they are expected to integrate into communities that may not be welcoming. The result is often that youth are isolated, without meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes or contribute to local governance and community development. Inadequate employment opportunities post-service: One of the major flaws of the NYSC is the failure to ensure that youths gain permanent employment or meaningful skills through the service. While corps members are expected to contribute to the community, the programme does not provide sufficient resources or support systems to make the contributions sustainable. Corps members are often left jobless after service, which contributes to the rising unemployment rate in Nigeria.

Exploitation and lack of funding: Despite the positive intentions, many NYSC placements in the private and public sectors often exploit corps members as low-cost labour. The stipends provided are grossly insufficient, and many corps members are placed in underfunded or poorly managed institutions, making the programme more of a financial burden than a stepping stone to success.

Limited political engagement: Although the NYSC aims to develop leadership skills, its focus is mostly on community service and education, not political or civic engagement. This sidelining of the political aspect means that the youth who graduate from the programme are often less

politically aware and less prepared for leadership roles within the nation's political sphere.

Marginalisation Consequence:

The NYSC has contributed to the marginalisation of youth by perpetuating an illusion of integration without providing real empowerment or access to leadership opportunities. Corps members are often left without meaningful pathways to stable employment or political inclusion, thus reinforcing the socioeconomic and political exclusion of Nigerian youths.

2. National Directorate of Employment (NDE)

Intended Purpose:

The NDE was established in 1986 to tackle youth unemployment and poverty. Its objectives included providing vocational training, small-scale enterprise development, and public works programs aimed at integrating youth into the economy.

Critique:

Failure to address scale: Although the NDE offers various training programmes, the scope is too limited to meet the needs of Nigeria's youth population. The scale of unemployment is vast, and the NDE's programmes do not reach a significant proportion of the unemployed youth. As a result, the impact has been minimal in reducing youth unemployment, and many youths do not gain access to the resources necessary for entrepreneurial success or sustained employment.

Lack of sustainable opportunities: Many of the training programmes offered by the NDE lack long-term sustainability. Once the training is completed, youths are often left without the capital, mentorship, or networks necessary to establish successful businesses or careers. This lack of post-training support contributes to a cycle of temporary solutions without long-term success.

Political manipulation: The NDE, much like other youth programmes in Nigeria, has been susceptible to political manipulation, where political elites use its initiatives for patronage, providing programmes and benefits to loyal supporters rather than focusing on merit-based allocations. This undermines the effectiveness of the programme and exacerbates youth marginalisation, as deserving candidates are overlooked in favour of political connections.

Marginalisation Consequence:

While the NDE was established to reduce unemployment, it fails to provide youths with a sustainable path to financial independence or

economic integration. Without adequate support, these programmes do not help young people create lasting livelihoods and instead perpetuate dependency on government initiatives.

3. **Ministry of Youth and Sports (1970s - 1980s)**

Intended Purpose:

The Ministry of Youth and Sports was established to coordinate youth development programmes, address issues related to youth empowerment, and foster a culture of sports and national unity.

Critique:

Lack of proper funding and institutional support: One of the primary issues with the Ministry of Youth and Sports was its chronic underfunding and lack of institutional capacity. Without adequate resources, it failed to properly manage or expand youth programmes. Youth development initiatives were often reduced to sporadic events or small-scale projects that did little to address the systemic challenges facing Nigerian youths.

Absence of inclusive youth policies: Despite creating the Ministry and several initiatives, there was no clear, unified national youth policy that addressed the root causes of youth unemployment, poverty, or political exclusion. Without a holistic approach, the ministry's efforts were fragmented and largely ineffective, which left Nigerian youths without meaningful opportunities for self-development or empowerment.

Political interference: Over time, the Ministry of Youth and Sports was merged with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and later dismantled or rebranded multiple times. This constant restructuring meant a loss of focus on youth issues. The lack of stability and continuity in the ministry contributed to the marginalisation of youth, as their needs were deprioritised in favour of more politically expedient initiatives.

Marginalization Consequence:

Despite having a dedicated ministry, youth concerns were not prioritised adequately, leading to underdeveloped and poorly executed programmes. The politicisation of the Ministry and the lack of sustained funding or coherent policies led to a systemic neglect of youth issues.

4. Youth Empowerment Programs (e.g., YOUWIN, SURE-P)

Intended Purpose:

Initiatives such as YOUWIN (Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria) and SURE-P (Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program) were established to reduce youth unemployment by providing young entrepreneurs with funding to launch businesses, while SURE-P was aimed at providing public works and job opportunities for youth.

Critique:

Limited reach and scope: Programmes like YOUWIN and SURE-P were not accessible to the majority of Nigerian youths. Only a small percentage of youths could benefit from these initiatives due to the competitive nature of the selection process and the limited resources available. As a result, the vast majority of unemployed youths were excluded from these opportunities.

Corruption and mismanagement: Both programmes were subject to inefficiencies, corruption, and mismanagement. In some cases, funds allocated for youth empowerment were diverted for political purposes, leaving many youths without the support they needed to start businesses or gain stable employment.

Failure to address structural problems: While these programmes provided financial support to some individuals, they did not tackle the underlying structural issues that contribute to youth unemployment, such as poor infrastructure, limited access to capital, and a lack of real job opportunities in key sectors of the economy. Additionally, the programmes were often short-term and failed to create lasting systemic change.

Marginalization Consequence:

Although well-intentioned, programs like YOUWIN and SURE-P had limited impact on the broader youth population. By only targeting a select few and failing to address systemic issues, they inadvertently contributed to the marginalisation of the larger youth demographic, as they did not create sustainable, wide-reaching solutions to youth unemployment.

5. N-Power Programme

Intended Purpose:

N-Power, launched in 2016, was intended to provide Nigerian youths with skills training and stipends while they engaged in public service roles in sectors like health, agriculture, and education.

Critique:

Inconsistent and limited impact: While the N-Power programme enrolled hundreds of thousands of youths, the long-term impact of the initiative has been inconsistent. Although it provided some financial support to participants, it failed to create long-term employment opportunities or career development pathways. Most participants found themselves in low-paying, temporary roles with no clear transition to permanent employment.

Political use of the program: Similar to other youth programmes, N-Power was criticised for being used as a tool for political patronage. Many of the beneficiaries were seen as politically aligned with the ruling party, and the programme's rollout was often marred by irregularities in the selection process.

Failure to address the root causes: While the programme provided temporary relief, it did not address the deeper, structural issues that drive unemployment among Nigerian youths, such as inadequate education, a weak private sector, and a lack of infrastructure.

Marginalization Consequence:

N-Power, while it provided temporary stipends to a significant number of youths, has not succeeded in offering a sustainable path to economic independence or political empowerment. It has instead reinforced the cycle of dependency and marginalisation by focusing on short-term solutions rather than long-term structural reforms.

Prospects of Nigerian Youths in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond

At key moments in national youth development, Winston Churchill's words as reported by (Akinyetun, T.S., 2021) offer valuable inspiration: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts." These words reflect the potential of Nigerian youth in the twenty-first century and beyond. Their prospects are shaped by several factors: they represent the largest segment of the population and are valuable assets to the nation. The future is theirs to shape, and the reinstatement of history education in schools will benefit younger generations. They also possess the skills and enthusiasm needed to take on national responsibilities. Youths make up the largest age group in Nigeria, which makes them crucial assets for the nation's progress. Age plays a significant role in the challenges faced by both Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Young Africans, especially those between the ages of 15 and 25, are the fastest-growing demographic. They account for 20 percent of the

continent's population and 60 percent of its unemployed individuals. In Nigeria, over 60 percent of the population is made up of youths, and more than 70 million of them are unemployed (Nyako, M. H., 2015).

Given this context, African and Nigerian governments must prioritise and empower their youth in state affairs. This will help ensure sustainable development for future generations. It is also important to recognise that the future belongs to the youth, a reality acknowledged by the current adult leadership. The saying "children or youths are the leaders of tomorrow" highlights this truth. The Agenda 2030 in Nigeria's 2019 National Youth Policy emphasises the future role of youth, stating: "The future of humanity and our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today's younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations."

Additionally, the revival of history education in schools is crucial for both youth development and nation-building. This was a significant achievement by the Historical Society of Nigeria, led by former President Professor CBN Ogbogbo and current President Professor Okpoh O. Okpoh Jr. Many Nigerian youths lack sufficient knowledge about the country's history. This gap remains, despite initiatives like the NYSC and other government programmes aimed at educating youths about Nigeria's history and geography. As the saying goes, "One cannot be more Catholic than the Pope," and no method can provide a better understanding of Nigeria's history than teaching history itself (Ogbogbo & Okpoh, O. O., 2008).

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that Nigerian youths have the necessary skills and energy to take on any national task. Nigerian youths are not "lazy," as some may claim. Whether at home or abroad, they make significant contributions wherever they are. In fact, more than 70 percent of the personnel in the Nigerian Armed Forces, Police, and other security agencies fall within the age range of 18 to 40. Given the vital qualities that youths possess, the Nigerian government and leadership should change their perspective towards young people. They need to invest in them and stop excluding them from key processes of nation-building and development. The Vision 2020 initiative, for instance, seemed to fail largely due to the government's unappealing attitude towards the youth and the negative consequences that followed it (Godwin Ushie, 2024).

Conclusion

The role of both youths and adults is crucial in the process of nation-building. However, it is essential to recognise that while youthful energy and enthusiasm are vital, they must not be mistaken for the depth of experience that adults bring to the table. Youths, with their innovative ideas, passion, and drive, offer fresh perspectives that can propel a nation forward. At the same time, adults contribute invaluable experience, wisdom, and a sense of stability that can guide the implementation of these ideas. In the delicate balance between youthful exuberance and adult experience, each group has its unique strengths

that, when combined, can lead to the successful development of a nation. Rather than viewing them as separate or competing forces, it is more productive to recognise that youths and adults must work together harmoniously. Their collaboration can ensure that the aspirations of young people are nurtured while benefiting from the guidance and understanding that comes with experience. In this regard, it is the responsibility of both the government and society to create an environment that allows for the active participation of youths in meaningful ways, while also acknowledging the need for adults to mentor, guide, and provide structure. In doing so, we can create a harmonious balance that paves the way for a brighter and more prosperous future for the nation.

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