



## Dynamics and Trajectories of Youth Participation in Democratic Practice in Ghana's Fourth Republic

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### Abstract

Ghana's January 7, 2001, and the subsequent January 7, 2009, and January 7, 2017 power changes satisfied Huntington's "Two Turnover Test thereby signifying "deepening democracy" in Ghana. That notwithstanding, Ghana's democratic participation experience has some deficits. Whether or not democratic participation turns to privilege the aged at the expense of the youth has not adequately been expounded. This paper argues that the potency of the youth to govern has not been unearthed empirically. Using in-depth interviews with selected political scientists, youth leaders and political activists, this paper interrogates implications of youth marginalization for self-empowerment and migration for greener pastures. Findings showed that direct democratic participation has been the preserve of the aged in most African countries and that the youths are marginalized because it is assumed that they are not "matured" enough to govern. It concludes that youth's marginalization is a function of youth's self-disempowerments and migration; hence, it recommends a comprehensive policy to enable the young people to make informed political choices and decisions.

**Keywords:** Youth Marginalization; Youth disengagement, Democratic participation; Self-empowerment; Disempowerment

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### Introduction

Ghana is a relatively young country in terms of experience in democratic participation (Ayee, 2016; Bratton, & van de Walle., 1998). The country has conducted relatively eight successful elections and has experimented with eight peaceful power transfers since it embraced democratic wave in the early 1990s, an unprecedented occurrence in the annals of the country's body politic. This is perhaps an attestation to the assertion made by some scholars that Ghana continues to be a 'Beacon for democracy in Africa (Ayee, 2016; Daddieh, 2011; Huntington, 1991).

Going by Samuel Huntington's (1991) standard, otherwise known as the Huntingtonian Two Turnover Test (TTT), one would have no doubt attested to the fact that the fourth peaceful handing



over of power on January 7, 2017 from Mahama-led National Democratic Congress (NDC) administration to Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo Addo-led New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration, Ghana has satisfied one of the conditions for democratic consolidation and hence democratic practice in Ghana's Fourth Republic can be said to have consolidated (Huntington, 1991). That notwithstanding, Ghana still has some democratic deficits with its participatory democratic experiences (Ayee, 2016; Daddie, 2011). Thus, Afrocentric scholars focusing on democracy in Ghana have since 1992 inadequately explained whether or not active democratic participation is a preserve of the "aged" or "matured" and at the exclusion of the youth (Ayee, 2016; Daddie, Cyril. K, 2011; Huntington, S.P, 1991). This uncertainty about democratic participation raises a number of critical questions in the discourse on democratic participation in the country.

The country's population is made up of over 60% of young people below 25 years and about 70% below 30 years (UNFPA Report 2016). In spite of the numerical strength of the youth, they are largely marginalized in terms of active participation in governance issues at all levels, and in all sectors of the economy (UNFPA Report 2016). Often times, the young people are regarded as largely incapable of making informed political choices and decisions (Scott, & Grisso, 1997) in that, it is always taken for granted that they are not 'matured' enough to govern. It is not surprising therefore that age qualification is one of the criteria for contesting political office in many African countries, of which Ghana is no exception. The implication is that a gerontocratic culture flourishes in Africa in general and Ghana in particular where the average age of a leader or a head of state is around 62 years, culminating into a generational disconnect between the majority of the population (made up of young people) and the rulers in Africa in general, and Ghana in particular (Scott, & Grisso, 1997).

Youth disengagement in active democratic participation means to disempower the young people socially, economically, and politically. Therefore, this paper argues that disempowerment of the youth does not only manifest in the political realm, but also, profound in the economic and social spheres. Youth friendly social services of health, education, sanitation, water supply etc. are also often in short supply in most African countries including Ghana. The rate of young unemployed people is high in Ghana averaging about 25-30%, hence, they are driven by emotions and impulses which do not only largely trigger social unrest, political conflicts and civil wars, but also serve as a



recipe for migration to other places in search of non-existing jobs as well as for several political uprisings (Scott, & Grisso, 1997).

The response of successive governments to the youth question has been largely inadequate and uncoordinated. Most governments in Ghana often dedicate ministries or departments to youth affairs, treating the problem in a sectoral way. However, young people are not only recipients of development programmes, but should also be active participants in the setting of development priorities and agenda (Scott, & Grisso, 1997). Many young people in the country have therefore turned to decry the success story of Ghana's democratic experiences by asking questions such as: What are the prospects of democratic participation for the youth bulges in Ghana? Why should the youth remain merely transitory social category, ancillary to the drivers of democratic rule? How can the youth of today be empowered so that they would be able to make informed political choices and decisions about issues of democratic participation?

Meanwhile, recognizing the challenges and the potentials of African youth in general, the African Union in 2006 passed the African Youth Charter (AYC 2006), a progressive framework for youth development and empowerment on the continent. Regrettably, however, the realization of this Charter remains a mirage (Hilmer, 2010). This paper therefore addresses the youth question in a comprehensive and engaging way, drawing on country and regional experiences of democratic participation to unearth the dynamics and trajectories of marginalization of the young people in active democratic participation in Ghana's Fourth Republic, as well as issues, problems, and challenges militating against youth political, economic and social empowerment. This is done on the backdrop that the potency of the youth to govern has not only properly been harnessed or grossed over but also, not adequately unearthed empirically.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on Participatory democracy Theory. Participatory democracy is believed to have originated with Arnold S. Kaufman's (1969) call for a "participatory politics". The distinctive argument made by Kaufman (1969) is observable in its supposed benefit in "the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling, and action." For instance, for an account of the influence of Dewey on Kaufmann, (1969), by way of C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman (1997), and in turn on Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the



Port Huron Statement, (Westbrooke, 1991), pp. 549–550). Participatory politics should not only be reflective in active participation in some aspects of the political landscape, but should result in complete “democratic participation” which means “exercising real power over the decisions that affect one” and this “would improve, generally, ‘one’s powers of thought, feeling and action” (Nylen 2003). Kaufman’s (1969) study resonates with Hilmer’s (2020) argument that once acclaimed by citizens, participatory democratic theory could propel citizens on for self-governance, beyond traditionally political sectors of society. This arguably because, political participation in some instances connote freedom and some proponents maintain that it is “not only as a collective action strategy necessary for furthering the interests of repressed, excluded and ignored individuals and groups, but as the vehicle for an individual’s psychological emancipation from the idea of natural sociopolitical hierarchies and the sense of personal impotence in breaking out of such hierarchies” (Nylen 2003).

The beginning of 21st Century saw a decline in research on the theory, however, it is predicted that there will be a resurgence (Himler, 2010), possibly following the awareness on the part of citizens on the need to obtain some recognition in the democratic process. It “may spur political scientists to focus on aspects of democratic participation that are undervalued in other contemporary theories of democracy” (Himler 2010, 44). Hence Kaufman’s (1969) somewhat vague argument for a participatory politics would be more clearly articulated by democratic activists as “participatory democracy.” Undeniably, Oklay (1999) advances participatory theoretical argument that it is the residual solution to democratic success story, in that, popular participation does not only enable the youth to be actively involved in local community governance through self-development initiatives but also, participatory democracy will serve as an active process by which the youth (beneficiaries) influence and direct the execution of democratic practice, rather than merely being consulted, receiving a sharing of the democratic benefits or seen as merely spectators of democratic governance. Consequently, emergence of participatory democratic theory in the 1970s as a critique of dominant democratic approaches, intended to address problems associated with democracy such as top-down approach- where decisions and solutions are imposed on youth or other people by the bureaucracy, since they are seen as subservient to democratic practice which means no feedback for the evaluation of democratic principles because a few channels exist for the youth leaders and other people to make inputs into existing democratic protocols, policy making



and development planning. In the worst case, democratic practice turns to provide adequate room for central governments to set up their own cadre of semi-autonomous state-sponsored political development strategies that depend on the state for support and patronage. Although, Participatory democratic theory does not represent a total panacea to or a holistic approach to solve democratic challenges, it is by far, seen as a catalyst for democratic success stories in sub-Saharan African countries including Ghana.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, using in-depth interview with ten participants (10) purposively selected including; 2 political scientists, 3 political leaders (activists), 2 pro-democracy activists and 3 youth in leadership positions in Accra, Ghana, to interrogate marginalization of the youth in terms of active participation in democratic governance and how the youth marginalization served to impede young people's ability to self-empower themselves. The absence of empirical research in Ghana in this regard served as the basis for the use of this exploratory approach. The Interview data was analyzed thematically. As already indicated, the sampling technique employed was purposive and judgmental, to select subjects based on their information power and knowledge on the subject matter. This explains why participants included political scientists, political leaders (activists) youth leaders and pro-democracy activists. With regards to data collection procedure, the researchers distributed letters to the prospective interviewees craving their participation in the interview process. Afterwards, the researchers scheduled interview meetings with the participants, giving them the opportunity to decide on the convenient time for the interview exercise, this was done in sync with the established ethical principles for credibility, dependability, confirmability and general trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004) of the information sought for. English and Twi languages were used interchangeably during the in-depth interviews. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality before the commencement of the interviews. In-depth interviews were audio recorded. The audio recorded information was played and transcribed. The transcribed data was subjected to thematic analysis for interpretation and discussions.



## Discussion of Findings

In a nutshell, the findings of this paper showed that the issue of governance has been the preserve of the “aged” or adults in most African countries, of which Ghana is no exception, and that the youths are seen as a mere transitory social category or representing political agency, “immature” enough to govern. The key findings are thematized for systematic elaboration.

## Measuring the Pulse of Political participation in Ghana

This finding provides important background for identifying national-level entry points for engaging young people in democratic governance activities. Article 62 of the 1992 constitution maintains that the minimum age for one to qualify as President of Ghana is 40. Also, among other conditional requirements, Article 94 of the same Constitution sets the minimum age for a Member of Parliament at 21, however, a cursory look at the current situation depict a largely aged parliament. In the run-up to elections, however, young adults are seen to be very active with campaign activities, but with little participation in governance itself. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report observes that the youth are a creative force, a dynamic source of innovations, and they have undoubtedly, throughout history, participated, contributed, and even catalyzed important changes in political systems, power-sharing dynamics and economic opportunities. They, however, face poverty, barriers to education, multiple forms of discrimination and limited employment prospects and opportunities, and hence hinders the youth’s opportunity towards participation in governance and major issues. One participant observed that:

While structural factors provide an important backdrop for analysis on young people’s civic and political engagement, the most important factor is how young people themselves perceive their situation. For that purpose, there is the need for analyzing political participation and apathy, trust in institutions, support for democracy and perceptions of governance and corruption among young people.

## Young Leaders for Governance (YLG)

The study found out that young people may need to be mentored in governance initiatives, once they showed interest in governance and leadership to equip them with the skills necessary to undertake national leadership and governance positions. Governments in Ghana may have to be deliberate with mentoring the youth by actively promoting their contribution in some important decision making processes, thereby empowering them. This is denotative of Nylen’s (2003, 27-28) definition of empowerment which observes the concept as “the transformation of an individual’s



prior mentality of fatalism and dependency on “higher ups” and/or an active disgust regarding all things political, to a new sense of personal responsibility to struggle against systemic exclusion and domination, and a belief in one’s efficacy to be successful in doing so”. One participant noted thus:

Recognizing young people as key stakeholders in the national and global development agenda, Ghana should establish and implement Young Leaders for Governance (GYLG) initiative for a period of four years.” The GYLG project strategy may be based on creating a critical mass of leadership for good governance in Ghana by investing in key change makers with a sphere of influence on governance outcomes.” “It may include training courses involving young leaders between the ages of 25 – 35 years, working in government or in areas of leadership in good governance. The GYLG project may partner Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP), a social intervention Agency to produce a set of customized leadership resource kits, train and produce leadership fellows trained in leadership skills. The programme is likely to be highly successful with stakeholders’ assistance. GYLG may have to be scaled up and replicated to other regions with an indicative curriculum structure to include: a leadership skills module, thematic module(s), reflection and peer learning and case studies.

### **Youth and Political Participation**

Findings show that the focus or studies on youth, in terms of their engagement in the political arena is relatively new and that, it is so revealing to hear that people below the age of 35 to 40 years are considered ‘young.’ A participant in the study observed that:

people under the age of 35 are rarely found in formal political leadership positions in a third world country like Ghana, and that, eligibility for the national parliament starts at 21 years or higher and it is common practice to refer to politicians as ‘young’ if they are below 35-40 years of age.

This finding therefore affirms the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) Report (2012) which discovered that, “priority, extremely timely, or particularly, importance has not been attached to youth participation in decision-making to enable them offer concrete interventions in times of difficulty”. Similarly, further findings revealed that:

youths are not given active participation in formal political institutions and processes such as Parliaments, political parties, elections, and public administrations and that the situation is even more difficult for both young women as well as women at mid-level and decision-making/leadership positions.





These findings clearly corroborated the earlier assertion made by Cincotta, (2009) that he was so optimistic about the analysis of recent demographic and political trends and therefore posits that countries with a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population referred to as a “youth bulge” are much less likely to have access to participate in stable liberal democracies than countries with a more “mature” age structure. Cincotta (2009) argues that the recent leveling off in measures of global democracy is temporary, and that as youthful demographic profiles mature, new and more stable liberal democracies are likely to arise in Latin America, North Africa, and Asia.

Moreover, Cincotta (2009) maintains that if fertility continues to decline and age structure continues to mature in many of the world’s current youth-bulge countries, analysts should expect most of these states to ultimately attain and maintain liberal democracy. However, he admits that there would be exceptions since the early 1970s, charismatic authoritarian leaders and single-party ideological elites have demonstrated a capacity to resist democratization, persisting even as their countries’ age structures matured. He then, compared two measures: First, the youth-bulge proportion—defined as the proportion of young adults (ages 15 to 29) in the working-age population (ages 15 to 64)—which is derived from estimates and projections published by the UN Population Division (2007); and second, liberal democracy, which is identified by a rating of “Free” in Freedom House’s (2008) annual evaluations of political rights and civil liberties from 1972 to 2007. Moreover, finding showed that until deliberate efforts are channeled into empowering the youth and young people-led organisations in Ghana, the status quo will not change. Some participants expressed it in this way:

In order to respond to the needs of young people, and to guarantee that their basic human rights are recognized and enforced, young people’s active and meaningful participation in their societies and in democratic practices and processes is of crucial importance.

Meaningful youth participation and leadership require that young people and young people-led organizations are given the opportunities, capacities, and benefit from an enabling environment and relevant evidence-based programmes and policies at all levels so that the young people’s right to participate and be included in democratic processes and practices becomes vital for the achievement of youth development goals reflecting the national development agenda.





## Youth and Decision-Making

With regard to youth participation in the decision-making process, findings provided a highlight on the main challenges of the youth, which included limited opportunities for effective participation in decision-making processes, limited opportunities and exposure to meaningfully participate in inclusive decision-making processes, young men and women feel excluded and marginalized in their societies and communities. A participant in the study observed that:

There is a need for participatory structures and greater trust between youth and institutions and for greater capacity development should therefore be stressed. Efforts should also be made to focus on the most vulnerable of young people, including via specific actions targeting young women.

The gaps noted above if bridged can potentially promote youth participation because as revealed by some participants, “young people have been noted of their vital stakeholdership in politics, conflicts and in peace- building situation”. Other participants observed that:

They are also seen as agents of change who provide a foundation for rebuilding lives and communities, contributing to a more just and peaceful society. Therefore, youth’s democratic participation has become and continues to be one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Although, young people’s right to democratic participation has been deemed important in numerous international agreements, however, the issue of young people’s integration into all spheres of the society and participation in the political process for leadership building has been compromised. Therefore, a political community in which its members’ differences make a difference to the exercise of political power is the only community that would allow the young men to truly participate in the democratic processes.

## Conclusion

Based on the broad scope set by this paper in its objectives, it draws a number of conclusions as far as youth or young people’s participation in the democratic process is concerned. First, it concludes that youth’s marginalization in active democratic participation of governance issues is a function of youth’s self-disempowerments and this to a large extent explains the prevalence of youth migration and its associated proliferation of antagonistic social forces. Second, it concludes that participation is a fundamental democratic right and so it should be an end in and of itself to remove existing barriers to youth political participation. Additionally, for the most part, promoting youth participation needs to be geared towards achieving levels relative to



those of the rest of the population where effective and meaningful youth democratic participation assumes certain key attributes such as building a consultative system to facilitate youth-led participation, where young people would have a direct impact on decision-making within their own youth communities; and finally involving youth collaborative participation to ensure that young people effectively take part in regular political decision-making processes. Another conclusion drawn from the findings is that, there is the need to strengthen and coordinate effective action by stakeholders. This is essential to achieve the overall goal of progressive and substantive inclusion of young people in political and decision-making processes at all levels. To reach this long-term objective therefore requires the re-definition of objectives of young people to enable them to articulate their action in the area of political inclusion.

Added to the above, the study concludes that, support to young people's participation in inclusive political processes and democratic practices embraces measures covering the wider enabling environment, individual capacity building and a specific focus on young women. Thus, the promotion of an enabling environment (legal frameworks, policies, and plans) for young people's participation in a broad range of processes and areas (electoral and parliamentary processes, public administration, and local governance); at local, sub-national and national levels have received scanty attention. Also, the promotion of young people's skills and capacities to participate actively in democratic practices, including in local, national, and global processes (leadership trainings, etc.), the promotion of young women's participation and presence in political office and decision-making at all levels (participation of young women -through both elected and non-elected positions) has not be given the needed priority; and finally, support to young people's inclusion in decision making and in all levels of development processes has exclusively been focusing on aged or adult at the neglect of young men and women in all sectors of the society.

### **Recommendations**

The conclusions drawn by this paper sets the tone for some practical recommendations to empower the youth for inclusion in the democratic process and decision-making. First, it recommends a comprehensive policy that initiates shadow ministerial appointments in all sectors of the ministries to enable the young people take advantage of such opportunity and to be groomed and nurtured to be able to make informed political choices and decisions about participatory governance issues.



Other recommendations are thematized as follows:

### **1. Establishment of National Youth Mock Parliament**

There is an urgent need for government of Ghana and national support for the establishment of a National Youth Parliament to empower active citizens at both local and national levels and provide an opportunity for youth to contribute to the framing of national policy through direct dialogue with parliamentarians to promote and increase youth political participation. This can be attained through the training of core groups of young trainers (trainer of trainers) to pilot debate training programmes as part of its youth programme with the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) and to increase youth political participation. MYS should support amplifying its engagement with youth through social media, with a view to facilitating online discourses. The MYS should also develop a database of youth groups in order to systematically solicit input from them on how to spur youth participation in the country's political life. Additionally, a 'Youth Participation in Local Governance' project should be established and sponsored as an innovation camp for youth, with features like mock elections, and interactive training on public speaking, the use of social media for development and other skills.

### **2. Promoting Productive Dialogue**

Ghana government should promote training through the Tertiary Institutions to develop a stronger culture of dialogue among their youth members to better influence Ghanaian political and social leadership. The tertiary institutions should also work with Inter- Parties Advisory Committee (IPAC) and other Ghanaian Youth NGOs, to engage with students in Ghanaian universities and their leadership in students' councils. The Institutions should target students in universities across the country with the aim to promote the role of the youth in enhancing a culture of dialogue which political parties have inadequately facilitated at the early years of Ghana's elections. This paper recommends that the capacities of students' representative council members should be enhanced to articulate effectively, communicate and persuasively argue issues that affect the youth as active individuals and engaged citizens. Special attention should be given to reinforcing the role of young Ghanaian women in political leadership.

### **3. Promoting Youth's Public Policy-making Skills**

The paper recommends the parliament of Ghana has to partner with the UNDP to develop and endorse a youth action to work with the relevant parliamentary committees to implement youth



strategies, including any possible changes to laws that are required. Consequently, the establishment and promotion of a Parliamentary Internship Programme in Ghana, to be able to expand to a greater number of Ghanaian graduates of all universities in Ghana, offering them a real opportunity to participate in public policy making. This programme should provide them with a training opportunity on public policy-making tools; and introduce them to the legislative and oversight functions of the Parliament and its function in the framework of parliamentary diplomacy in regional and national issues. On the occasion of the Anniversary of Ghana's Independence, conferences on "Democratic Transitions in Ghana and its impact on Ghanaians" should be held with the participation of youth and women in political parties. The conferences should provide entry points and follow-up actions for youth and women's organizations to engage with political parties on policy definition. The objective of the conference should align with raising and enhancing public awareness on democracy and emphasize on its importance along with the development and the promotion of Human Rights and fundamental freedoms.

#### **4. Design Policy for Reporting on Governance**

At a time when revising core social and economic policies, reliable data is critical to informed decision-making, including on youth priorities. Young people's voices need to be reflected and recognized by the government and other stakeholders, in order to empower the young people. There should be policy to provide training to youth-led advocacy organizations on governance assessments, assist the development of an indicator framework on degrees of youth participation as well as the mainstreaming of youth issues—covering processes such as debates at National and regional levels.

#### **5. Ensure Greater Justice for Disadvantaged Groups**

Ghana government should ensure that the vulnerable groups of youth have access to justice and fundamental human rights, in line with national objectives for better social and economic opportunities for youth, justice and social inclusion. Youth should be encouraged to learn strategic advocacy skills to apply to their key concerns and be provided with support from legal aid providers and support networks, as well as the National Legal Aid Council and related initiatives which aim to develop capacities to support youth empowerment for disadvantaged youth.



## 6. Encouraging the Youth's Participation in Local and National Elections

The 'Strengthening Democracy Programme/Component: Youth Multimedia Civic Education Initiative' aimed at reaching million young people should be developed in partnership with all the media houses in the country, informed by a baseline study on youth knowledge, attitudes and practices in the context of public affairs. The media should promote entertaining stories oriented around the experiences of young people to inform them of their civic rights and responsibilities and break down stereotypes that youth should refrain from active roles in public life. Ghana government should develop "Strategy of Response to Transformative Change (SRTC) to be championed by the Youth to promote youth political participation. It should also adopt various measures aimed at job creation, social inclusion and youth volunteerism including substantial activities targeting political participation. This would in the long run reflect the need to pursue more knowledge and practice related to fostering youth political participation.

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